Breaking the BIG STORY

Great Moments in Indian Journalism

edited by **B.G.Verghese**

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As a watchdog of public interest and the voice of the small man, it is the duty of the media to uphold democracy by exposing what those in authority may prefer to gloss over or hide. But in this age of instant communication and twenty-four-hour television, the focus is on breaking the story as it happens, with little attempt to interpret and analyse. In this context, when everything appears 'big' and yet superficial, has the 'big story' become defunct or is it more important than ever before?

Breaking the Big Story showcases great moments in Indian journalism, when journalists chose to lead rather than follow the mob, to investigate and forewarn, to expose corruption at the highest level, to intervene as ghastly events unfolded in a bid to pre-empt them, to cover ethnic strife in foreign lands, to tear away the blinkers from the eyes of a gullible nation that sought refuge in its sporting icons, to pose as arms dealers and investigate dubious aspects of defence purchases, to cover communal clashes and point to a new direction. In short, to break a big story.

This volume brings together nine essays on major stories or exposés by their authors in the Indian print or electronic media. Raajkumar Keswani writes about his attempts to warn people of the looming dangers posed by Union Carbide in Bhopal and the death three years later of thousands of people following the gas leak. Sampad Mahapatra questions the 100-year-old definition of death by starvation and discovers that people will eat anything to keep death at bay. Sanjoy Hazarika, Teesta Setalvad and Muzamil Jaleel relive the horrors perpetuated in the name of ethnicity and identity in Assam, Gujarat and Kashmir. Anita Pratap recollects similar

(Continued on the back flap...)

Rs 295

08/2022
STRAND PRICE
$ 5 00

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Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi 110 017, India
Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, UK
Penguin Group Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 10 Alcorn Avenue, Suite 300, Toronto, Ontario, M4V 3B2, Canada
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd., Cnr Rosedale & Airborne Roads, Albany, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank 2196, South Africa

First published in Viking by Penguin Books India 2003

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Sabon by R. Ajith Kumar, New Delhi

Printed at Saurabh Printers Pvt Ltd., Noida

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Introduction

B.G. VERGHESE

Information empowers because information is power. News, it has been said, is that which authority would wish to hide; everything else is advertising. The aphorism might appear a trifle exaggerated but cannot be cynically dismissed either. Truth, like sunlight, has a great cleansing property. The media's role is therefore to expose all that happens and has a bearing on the physical, moral and material well-being of the citizen and society. This is the public interest.

The press was with good reason characterized as the Fourth Estate alongside the Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal and the (House of) Commons or, in a more modern context, the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. It is vox populi, the voice of the people, the sovereign We. The media must not only be heard but must also hold the mirror to society, its beauty and ugliness, warts and all, as much as its triumphs and tragedies whether ordained by man or nature. A mirror reflects but does not feel or understand. The media, however, has an additional role: to interpret and analyse.

Breaking the Big Story endeavours to capture certain moments or facets of truth that are larger and more poignant than the ordinary. They send out a call for succour and relief and evoke compassion in the face of disaster. They shock and shame people and stir the nation's conscience when there is exposure of graft, greed, folly or inhumanity. There is a cry for inquiry, justice, recompense. Knowledge or transparency compels accountability for acts of omission and commission

in governance or public conduct. Solzhenitsyn likened a great writer to 'a second government'. The media at its best has a similar role, between university and government.

Freedom of speech and expression are inherent human rights and essentially give meaning to all other rights through the process of articulation and communication. In the beginning, all temporal and spiritual power was divided between God and Caesar, prelate and monarch. Kings claimed a divine right that the clergy upheld. It was a mutually comforting relationship. Defiance of the established order, whether by word or deed, was either heresy or treason. Came the age of enlightenment and reason, the renaissance and reformation by whatever name, both product and incubator of scientific inquiry. The world was transformed.

The monopoly over learning was broken. Technology gave wing to change. Subjects became citizens. People began to take charge. They cried out for liberty, equality, fraternity, the rule of law, justice. That very articulation carved a place for freedom of expression in the democratic pantheon. Milton wrote against licensing of books and in Areopagitica asserted that truth would prevail over falsehood given free inquiry and discussion.

At first, the danger was from views and opinions that challenged established wisdom, secular or sacred. The laws of sedition failed to curb the tide. The rotary press, steam engine, telegraph and the ensuing succession of newer technologies extended the reach and speed of dissemination of news. People sought access to governance through information in order to participate meaningfully in civic affairs. The right to know and make informed choices or hold those in authority accountable was sought to be screened by legislating veils of official secrecy. The grounds: security of state, public order, incitement to offence, parliamentary privilege and contempt of court.

Today, the information and communications revolution has created an instant world and given the media global reach. The news cycle of the twenty-four-hour daily newspaper has

shrunk even beyond the hourly broadcast news bulletin to being purveyed in real time. The media has become more intrusive than ever. Privacy needs protection. But both official secrecy and privacy have to contend with public interest that extends to the public persona of private persons and the public or social consequences of acts of commission or omission at every level of governance, whether official, corporate or otherwise. Privacy is important but cannot be pushed too far. Where the line is to be drawn can only be determined by the particular circumstances of each case.

This is the setting. It is no wonder that the very first amendment to the Indian Constitution, as to that of the United States, entrenched freedom of the press as the bedrock of democracy. In the Indian case, the 1950 enactment widened the ambit of Article 19(2). It enjoined that permissible restrictions on freedom of expression must be 'reasonable' and not arbitrary. This makes them justiciable. The Supreme Court has over the years steadily widened the amplitude of freedom of expression through a series of creative judgements. In 1996 the Court decreed that denial of the right of the Cricket Association of Bengal to telecast a cricket match was an encroachment on freedom of expression. The petition resulted in a famous judgement opening up the airwaves. A division bench held the electromagnetic spectrum to be a natural resource and hence public property that might be regulated but not appropriated as a state monopoly.

There has now just been enacted a statute on Freedom of Information that, despite its cautious approach, marks a transition from the regime of secrecy to that of the citizen's right to know and to inform and be informed. This right is the heartbeat of every open and democratic society.

Closed societies and authoritarian rulers feel threatened by the free flow of information and employ propaganda as a means of control. Censorship was the prime instrument of the Emergency in India. But dictatorships give rise to coteries and

courtiers who seek to protect themselves by building walls which then keep them in ignorance of changing realities that ultimately overwhelm them. The free press is a great safety valve and ensures the necessary checks and balances that make for both stability and progress. Questions drive progress. The essence of journalism is to question the why, what, when, how, who and where of things, and what thereafter? Answers provoke further questions.

The Freedom of Information Act, however, tends to draw a curtain on security. This may appear to conform to the letter of Article 19(2) but violates its true meaning and spirit. In practice, the exclusions tend to be wide. Human nature instinctively acts to protect personal privacy as much as authority seeks to maintain institutional privacy, revealing as little as possible, rather than too much, except when there is something to preen about. Security is often pleaded to cover up the follies and foibles of men and institutions, especially of the great organs of state power. It is not necessarily the security of the state that is sought to be protected from public scrutiny, but the 'security', interest or reputation of the government of the day, the chief executive, minister or other functionaries. The public interest is readily invoked to shield political, personal, corporate or institutional embarrassment, ignominy and shame.

Breach of security is presumed to be dangerous in so far as it poses a threat to the integrity of the state. National pride and patriotism can then be summoned to the cause with emotion drowning reasoned debate. Siding with the enemy is a charge sometimes flung at the media for exposing graft or incompetence. Yet, blindly to endorse one's country right or wrong can be a disastrous prescription. Governments are often proven wrong when timely public disclosure and debate might have pulled them back from the brink. Some time after the event, *New York Times* told John F. Kennedy that the media had refrained from publishing all it knew about the abortive

Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. James Reston has it that the President exclaimed he wished the press had disclosed much more information as the American people 'might have forced cancellation of one of the most embarrassing American military and diplomatic adventures of the century' (*Artillery of the Press*, Harper Row, 1966). Restraint is not quite the same as self-censorship.

Later, live print and television coverage from the field was to play a significant role in mobilizing American opinion against continuation of the Vietnam war. A tight security and security blanket enabled Washington to pursue a course that caused much grief all around. Countless American families wanted to know why their loved ones were dying in Indo-China as much as the hapless people at the receiving end of US military power. The Pentagon Papers, compiled by the Department of Defense for a confidential review of the sorry sequence of events, was leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, a former official. The department obtained a temporary prior restraint order against publication on grounds of 'irreparable harm'. This was later overturned in favour of *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The US Supreme Court saw no 'clear and present danger' in disclosure.

What is a 'big story?' There can be many definitions: the magnitude of the disaster, the far-reaching consequences of the event in question, the gross nature of the violation, the sheer audacity of the perpetrators. If news represents something out of the ordinary, the big story is about the extraordinary. It may have to be investigated and exposed. But it could be so obvious as to have gone unnoticed. Incremental change is not easily discerned but, looking back, a transformation is suddenly apparent. This is where an 'event' differs from a 'process'. A disaster or a single or series of closely interrelated happenings is an event. But development and social change are processes spread over a period of time.

Economic and social development are essential to poverty alleviation. In a traditional, semi-feudal society such as India

this often entails long, slow processes leading to modernization, rising productivity and social change. These underlying trends may spawn both achievement and alienation. Trauma and unintended pain to sections of the community is often inherent in any development transition and constitutes a big story that is all too often untold or insufficiently told. Scandal and sensation easily make the headlines and it is this genre that generally commands the most attention. Yet, in the long haul, it is the former that could well leave the deeper imprint and is the more meaningful for the inspiration it offers or the warning bell it sounds.

News, like beauty, lies in the beholder's eye. It is innately subjective, though good journalism requires that the story be told as objectively as possible. To be entirely subjective is to be an ideologue, activist, pamphleteer or crusader. These may be legitimate pursuits but not consistent with the media or reporter's role as trustee of the reader, listener or viewer's right to know. It is on a fair and balanced recitation of facts that the recipient is enabled to form his or her own opinion, with backgrounding to situate the event or happening in the given context.

Views are not taboo but belong to editorial comment and clearly designated columns of opinion. These could be insightful and wise but are the views of the paper or the author, which one is free to accept or reject. Mixing comment with fact, and even inadvertently passing one for the other, is to introduce subjective bias into the story and distort or adulterate the product. Even within a single story, any news analysis helpfully undertaken by the reporter should draw a clear line between fact and comment or interpretation.

The subjective element inherent in reporting any event is well told in the Japanese film *Rashomon*. This tells of an event that takes place at a crossroads in a forest clearing and its subsequent narration by various characters approaching the scene along different paths. Three distinct stories emerge. Each

represents a given perspective, a state of mind. All are subjectively true, but the objective reality is different. Truth has many facets and the best report is perhaps that which seeks to comprehend them all.

The recipient of information is sometimes identified as a 'consumer'. However, information is not a commodity, a tradable product like soap, though this is something to which it may be reduced. Will it sell? Like everything else in the world of commerce, a newspaper or broadcast programme must sell to earn its keep. But sensationalism and titillation is something else. This is to trivialize news or information and treat it as a commodity purveyed to secure the largest number of consumers.

If the media is seduced by the pursuit of circulation or ratings through crass sensationalism irrespective of any higher values, it is in danger of degenerating to the level of the loudest tabloids of the popular press that thrive on a mix of cheesecake, scandal and scurrility. This is not the proudest model of responsible journalism. This genre tends to be viewed as entertainment or 'infotainment'. The reader is or should be treated a citizen as much as a consumer for whom the advertisement and entertainment columns are available.

However, Hugh Cudlipp, editor of *Daily Mirror*, defended sensationalism in his book *Publish and Be Dammed* (1953). Writing about Britain's abdication crisis of 1936, the Duke of Windsor sadly remarked in his memoirs, *A King's Story*, that he was shocked by what the newspapers had written. 'Could this be the King, or was I some common felon? The Press creates: the Press destroys.' *Daily Mirror* had actually risen to the defence of Edward VIII. Was the coverage sensational? Cudlipp quotes his predecessor, Silvester Bolam, to this effect: 'The *Mirror* is a sensational paper. We shall go on being sensational to the best of our ability. Sensationalism does not mean distorting the truth. It means the vivid and dramatic presentation of events so as to give them a forceful impact on the mind of the reader. It means big headlines, vigorous writing, simplification into

familiar everyday language, and the wide use of illustration by cartoon and photograph.'

James Reston too was later to use Cudlipp's title *Publish and Be Dammed* as a chapter heading in his book. But he used it with a mark of interrogation in discussing awkward choices reporters and editors have to make in publishing sensitive stories. Cudlipp and Reston were writing of different things. There is a distinction between style and substance. And the content Reston had in mind related to great matters of state. In contrast, *Daily Mirror* got a woman with a broken knee to try and hatch an egg while recovering in bed!

Sensationalism as ordinarily understood debases the media and invites adverse attention or regulatory legislation of the kind sought to be introduced in India from time to time, not always justifiable and occasionally propelled by ulterior political motives. The ill-conceived Bihar Press Bill of 1984 and the Anti-Defamation Bill of 1987 rightly ran foul of public opinion as they recalled the Emergency. The Right of Reply Bill introduced by a private member in the Lok Sabha in 1994 was, again, so sweeping that it failed to pass muster and had to be withdrawn. But trial by the press, as in the reportage of the Shivani Bhatnagar murder case in 2002, is equally to be deplored. Her distraught husband is quoted as remarking, 'My wife was murdered once, but her character has been assassinated over and over again in print.' Not that crime should not be investigated. Those who take liberties with the law themselves sometimes seek recourse to the law to avoid exposure as the matter is sub judice. Yet there are limits that should never be exceeded.

The young reporter may be misled or carried away by the chase. It is for the editor to ensure standards and fair play. Within this frame, the media has the right, and indeed the duty, to report all that it deems to be in the public interest without fear or favour. Defamation is to be avoided, but privacy cannot be pushed too far when public personalities and issues or

national interest are involved. In the famous case of *New York Times* vs Sullivan (1964) the US Supreme Court decided that without proof of malicious intent, no penalty should be levied. The 'chilling effect' this might have on the press was better avoided. For it was Thomas Jefferson who declared that 'the basis of our government being the opinion of our people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter . . . No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free, no one ever will.'

There is the other danger of the media cosying up to authority, with individual newsmen abandoning the mantle of watchdog to become lapdogs. Preferential access to great and powerful sources (possibly only to get tantalizing titbits rather than real substance), stroking the journalist's ego and the distribution of freebies and favours are some of the means by which the media has been bought. The proverbial adversarial role of the press does not imply opposition for the sake of opposition but a questioning attitude that does not accept the official version as the last word, the whole truth or the sole truth. An irreverent media can deflate arrogant and egocentric power. Laxman's Common Man has been rendering that service wonderfully well for half a century.

It is that combination of independence, fairness and a sense of responsibility in weighing catch phrases such as public interest, national security and the common good that vests the media with credibility. Lose these and all is lost. The trustee, the tribune is corrupted; the gamekeeper turns poacher. Opinions clearly and forcefully expressed are unexceptionable though they be unpalatable or contrary to conventional wisdom. The free media is a marketplace of ideas and much good has emanated through the ages from the clash of opinions. The media cannot be content with merely reflecting popular views

and fancies. It has a duty to lead rather than embrace the mob, weigh the pros and cons and point to new directions. This it does not just by the views to which it gives expression but by its selection of news and the emphasis it gives to issues that matter.

The very power of the modern media makes it attractive for those in authority to use it for disinformation. News management and plants have become instruments of propaganda, cover-up and even psychological warfare. Witness President Musharraf's statement in Islamabad in January 2003, later sought to be lamely explained away, that had India stepped across the Line of Control during the Kargil war, Pakistan would have made an unconventional response.

The film *Wag the Dog* is a spoof on how an American president, caught in a peccadillo, is set up for re-election by the Dirty Tricks department of the White House with the assistance of a Hollywood producer, by creating a national 'emergency' and saturating every media outlet with it. It is hilarious but frightening. For all manner of situations and effects are known to be manufactured to further special interests. The American demonization of Iraqi President Saddam Hussain for collateral diplomatic and military ends is the most recent case in point. During 'Desert Storm', CNN had Peter Arnett in Baghdad to tell the story from the other side while the rest of the American (and Western) media was officially shepherded out of harm's way and made to report what was allowed to be shown on television. This was later retold by one of the journalists concerned in *Hotel Warriors*. Evelyn Waugh's novel *Scoop* tells of how a bored London editor sent a correspondent somewhere in Africa to get a sensational story, any story. The reporter invented a graphic scare that so alarmed the local rival powers that it ended in war.

In all these cases the media was used, albeit fictionally in some cases. But truth can be stranger than fiction.

Where does one draw the line? As editor of *Hindustan Times* in 1971, this writer after anxious deliberation decided not to carry a story filed by the paper's correspondent in Calcutta, headquarters of the Indian Army's Eastern Command. This said that an American naval flotilla led by the nuclear-armed aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* was steaming into the Bay of Bengal even as the Pakistan army was poised to surrender in East Pakistan. Confirmation was not forthcoming and the news may have caused panic given Nixon's 'tilt' against India. The report was not used but subsequently confirmed. A major scoop was spiked. It could have been used with restraint. No security breach was involved here.

Earlier, reporting for *Times of India*, this writer and Prem Prakash of *Visnews* were the only two Indian newsmen with nine other foreign correspondents in Tezpur when the Chinese broke through the Indian defences at Se La and rolled down to the foothills on the night of 20 December 1962. The IV Corps had pulled back to Guwahati. All civil personnel were advised to evacuate the North Bank. Tezpur was deserted barring these eleven journalists and the bewildered inmates of the local mental home who were let loose and found grubbing around the charred remains of the State Bank of India's currency chest that had been torched before the staff fled! That midnight, the Chinese broadcast a unilateral ceasefire and pull back to their Himalayan claim line. The story was never told. All communciations were down. When subsequently filed, it was censored. This was the start of a political cover-up that has not permitted the Henderson Brooks inquiry ordered by the Army Chief to be published to this day. No security is involved, only political face.

The government reacted very differently in 1999. It promptly appointed the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) to report on how any such eventuality might be prevented in future. It was not a fact-finding inquiry, as the media kept

insisting as it waited for heads to roll. Though not an empowered commission of inquiry nor a joint parliamentary committee (JPC) nor again a body vested with any kind of statutory authority, the KRC found all doors and documents open to it on the basis of a single letter from the Cabinet Secretary requesting full cooperation. It can be said with assurance that no committee, commission or JPC has since Independence enjoyed the kind of access and cooperation accorded to the KRC at all levels and from every quarter, civil, military, intelligence.

As a member of the KRC I believe that little that we saw or heard needed to be classified. Even genuinely secret matters have a limited shelf life, especially after the event. The KRC Report was drafted accordingly. The main report was published expeditiously, though with some minor excisions. The blank spaces carried the legend 'Security Deletion'. However, the sixteen volumes of annexures were suppressed, including even published material, captured diaries and a quite fascinating revelation of how the Indian nuclear programme was carried forward by half a dozen governments of different hues up to the Pokhran II tests of May 1998. This established that in Pakistan's official judgement, it had thrice deterred India by resort to nuclear blackmail well before the Pokhran test. Failure to publish this material in any form resulted in India taking an international beating not only at the Agra Summit and thereafter but domestically on issues to which answers are available. Security was not enhanced; public interest was impaired.

The same is true of the strange secrecy that has surrounded maps of the Siachen sector along the formally agreed extension of the Line of Control beyond the last demarcated grid reference NJ 9842 in the glaciated regions in the northernmost reaches of Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan has sold the world the story that Siachen is on its side of the 'line', whereas the facts are otherwise. Few in India know this. It is extraordinary how

governments are prone to shoot themselves in the foot in the name of 'security'.

In *Breaking the Big Story* we have a collection of reflections on major stories retold by the reporters who tracked and broke them over the past couple of decades. One can go back earlier, but Parliament was perhaps the greater newsmaker in India during the first thirty years of Independence. The brouhaha attending the purchase of reconditioned Army jeeps, the Mundhra-Life Insurance Corporation and Housing Factory scandals, the M.O. Matthai episode and others of that vintage were broken by and sustained by members of Parliament (MPs). The press reported these, adding little. MPs enjoyed high credibility and it is to them that harassed citizens, disgruntled elements and others went with their tales of woe. Parliament was a hallowed institution, held in awe and deep respect. So in the popular mind, this rather than the press was the proper forum for disclosure, exposure and justice through the cut and thrust of debate. This was the tribune.

Equally, the first quarter century after Independence was a 'socialist' era when the larger and more successful newspapers were stigmatized as being part of a monopoly 'jute' press owned by industrial barons out to exploit the media for their own aggrandisement. A draft Bill was circulated to 'diffuse' newspaper ownership and 'delink' it from industrial houses. Newsprint was scarce, having to be imported in large measure, and therefore subject to official allocation through newsprint control orders. Advertising was limited, with sluggish industrial growth and a price-page schedule was vociferously advocated even by sections of the press to ensure fair competition between large and small papers. These fanciful ideas were recipes for disaster and would have destroyed the Indian press had they not been fended off. The Supreme Court ruled that newsprint control should not become an instrument for newspaper control. These developments showed how little the concept and

meaning of freedom of the press and information was understood by all too many in the country. Freedom of the press was seen as a prerogative claimed by industrial barons or family proprietors and not an essential element of the media's role as a trustee of the people's right to know—to inform and be informed.

The curtailment of liberties and the imposition of pre-censorship during the Emergency changed all that. In a flash ordinary people as much as the political parties realized that any diminution of press freedom would gag their own freedom of expression. Thus, if India won Independence in 1947, it won freedom in 1977. The dangers of centralized state power were plainly apparent and the new trend was to encourage decentralization, non-governmental initiatives and wider popular participation. The media was a major beneficiary of the new ethos. Growing political and social consciousness, technology and economic growth saw the beginnings of a media revolution. Investigative journalism was not newly invented. However, it came into its own with a new breed of editors and reporters, increasingly spilling over into the world of television with the opening up of the airwaves. The passing of the grand old men who had battled in the nationalist movement and the erosion of single-party dominance also left their mark. The somewhat more fractious and boisterous conduct of parliamentary business after the 1967 election and Congress split of 1969 tilted the balance from Parliament to the press as possibly the more effective forum for disclosure and redress. The growth in newspaper circulation and the advent of television reinforced this trend.

Practitioners of the new journalism in India drew lessons in this regard from the international media—from America and Britain in particular, with English being a shared language. The range and depth of investigative stories done by *Observer* and *Sunday Times* in Britain and by *New York Times* and *Washington Post* across the Atlantic fired the imagination.

Harry Evans of *Sunday Times* built up the Insight team that did a number of powerful stories. Among the better known of them was the Thalidomide case relating to birth deformities in Europe as a result of the use of this new drug in the early stages of pregnancy. Two to three thousand birth deformities were reported, about 500 of them from the UK and West Germany.

Earlier, the big Indian news breaks tended to scoop particular events. I recall reporting the return of King Tribhuvan to Nepal and the establishment of democratic rule in that hitherto hermit kingdom in 1951. I was in the first aircraft ever to land in Nepal, in a meadow that is now Kathmandu's Tribhuvan airport, but had to walk out of the valley—there being no other way to travel! To be in at the creation of a country reborn was exciting. I had a similar experience visiting Bhutan when that kingdom opened up in 1959–60. It took an exquisitely painful ride on pony and a foot march through beautiful fern and leech-filled forests to get to Paro, the temporary capital, from the road head at Phuntsholing.

In the 'old journalism' of the day, planning—projects, allocations, announcements—made news; development did not. The implementation process seemed too tedious and incremental to warrant attention, especially if in remote and uncomfortable places. I found it exhilarating to see the first Plan translated into action on the ground through the construction of the first lot of river valley and industrial projects. Nehru described these as 'temples of modern India'. I also reported the beginnings of the community development movement and national extension service in the experiments conducted by Albert Meyer in Etawah and S.K. Dey in Nilokheri and, on another plane, the building of Faridabad by urban refugees from the North West Frontier Province under Sudhir Ghosh. Kusum Nair wrote a perceptive book, *Blossoms in the Dust*, about social change engendered by community development.

My discovery of India continued, not least in two great sweeps around the country in 1959 and 1964 reporting on

how the much-talked-of five-year Plans had come alive with projects put to work. It was a deeply rewarding experience and an altogether fascinating story of an India at work—pulsating, dynamic, aspiring, achieving, far away from the drawing room circuit of incessant chatter. The heroic effort by an ancient nation to modernize, roll back poverty and improve the quality of life of its people within a democratic milieu, while staying ahead of the revolution of rising expectations, was far and away the biggest 'breaking story' of all. Few in the media saw it that way.

Some years later, during the great Bihar famine that in fact engulfed most of eastern India, groundwater was 'discovered'. Still later in 1971–72, during the Maharashtra famine, I titled an article 'A blessing code-named famine', pointing out that it was in times of extreme distress that the poor seemed to receive food, employment, medicare and national attention generally. But famine was soon to become a thing of the past with the green revolution, the basis for which had been laid by the national extension service, river valley projects like Bhakra and many more Sindri fertilizer plants. However, hunger persists.

The more intrusive post-Emergency 'new journalism' is essentially what this volume is about. The 'people' had restored democracy. What was happening to them? There was an awakening interest in issues of equity and other social concerns—the little man, the grass roots, the environment, the consumer. There were now more players in the field and more voices heard on and off stage. Investigatory stories appeared. Latterly, the Indian media has also begun to overcome an earlier nationalist syndrome that, pushed too far, like 'security', detracts from eternal values whose extinction can only do harm by undermining core national and human values. This led to human rights exposures in Jammu and Kashmir and in the North-East that stood the country in good stead.

Indian Express got a reporter, Ashwini Sarin, to purchase a village girl, Kamala. This exposed the flesh trade and

underlined the shameful fact that abject poverty compelled the most disadvantaged to sell their daughters in order to survive. The story was done with due caution and sensitivity so that the girl's future and well-being should not be jeopardized as far as possible. Another story showed that public opinion supported the blinding of jailed criminals in Bhagalpur by their custodians to disable them from committing further crimes as and when released, as widely expected. Here was a poignant comment on the breakdown of the criminal justice system. Corruption, callousness, communal and caste hatred and the world of mafia dons were exposed. Nalini Singh got some vivid footage on electoral malpractice and booth capturing in north Bihar that was televised by Doordarshan. The examples can be multiplied.

In all these cases and since, the media was in the lead. MPs and, sometimes, lawyers took their cue therefrom to bring up these issues in Parliament or in court. This was not without risk of breeding incestuous relationships—a danger that must be averted through self-imposed codes and standards and internal regulation.

All the essays in this volume have elements of high drama and tragedy. Like other stories outside this narrative, editors and other colleagues invariably supported the reporter in many ways—allowing him or her necessary latitude in time, money and space. The journalist, of course, had to have a nose for news, relating little clues (maybe picked up from references in the vernacular press) to a larger public interest that they then tenaciously pursued. Each such effort requires careful research, much scouting around, field investigation, courage and dogged perseverance. The reporter or paper may encounter threats or pressure or be sought to be seduced by blandishments. The Indian media generally does not rely on pre-publication legal advice as in the West. Sometimes this can prove costly. The facts may be correct, the presentation defamatory. In one well-known case, the editor of *Illustrated Weekly* (now closed) was

taken to court by the then chief minister of Orissa who sued for Rs 1 crore in damages but settled for a prominently displayed apology with regard to a sexual charge that he denied. As a rule, the stronger or more sensitive the story, the greater the need for care in establishing every detail, maintaining balance and fairness.

The nine big stories here, recounted in tranquillity by their authors long after publication, touch on a variety of themes. They narrate how they came to write the story. Some relate to a single episode; others entailed a series of reports in an unfolding sequence of events to capture a wider movement, trend or sentiment. The recital evokes a range of emotions: compassion, shame, horror, outrage, disgust.

The Bhopal gas tragedy is probably the world's worst environmental disaster in which a multinational was allowed to walk away from its moral and, some would say, criminal responsibility. The catastrophic death of 15,000 or more innocent victims engulfed by deadly fumes from the Union Carbide plant as they slept was decided in a mechanistically legal manner that seemed to mock the enormous human tragedy. Ambulance chasers descended on the scene in droves from the United States, scenting substantial commissions from the costs and damages they promised to secure their clients from American courts. The Indian government decided to take over the case and seek collective damages. In switching the case from American to Indian courts (in the hope of speedy justice) dollar compensation was translated into rupee life-values. The Supreme Court approved the package. A little later Exxon, the US oil giant, paid out billions of dollars as damages for polluting the Alaskan coast and the marine ecology when one of its tankers, the Exxon Valdez, ran aground spilling 2,50,000 barrels of oil. That was in March 1989. The contrast is telling.

Raajkumar Keswani smelt the Union Carbide story way before the event and wrote a series of stories in his local Hindi weekly, *Rapat*, warning of a possible disaster after a gas death

in 1981. Smaller gas leaks, poor safety, maintenance and supervision were flagged. The issue attracted desultory attention. Keswani refused to give up. He persisted, digging deeper. His impassioned appeals for corrective action went unheeded. He turned activist as he says and tried filing a public interest suit in the Supreme Court. He was derided and left Bhopal for a while to take up a job in Indore. A year later the Delhi daily *Jansatta* prominently featured a story by him on the Carbide plant and the impending dangers it appeared to pose. When the killer gas escaped in December 1984, he was distraught that his pleadings had gone in vain. There was the usual blame game and cover-up. The power and poignancy of the story is evident in Keswani's unvarnished account. Bhopal buried its dead. Before long, it was business as usual. The long-term human suffering will continue to linger.

The media poached on Keswani's story and even plagiarized some of his work but he was recognized through a national media award. In the aftermath, compensation is still being doled out and victims' organizations continue to fight for justice. The struggle continues. But the media has not really stayed with it. The 'news' has moved on.

A reply to a question in the Lok Sabha on 10 December 2002 provides something of an epilogue. It reads:

> Government is committed to provide all possible help to the Bhopal Gas victims. It has created an office of the Welfare Commissioner under the Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster (Processing of Claims) Act, 1985 to adjudicate and disburse compensation to Bhopal gas victims. In all, 10,29,431 cases were filed by the claimants, out of which 10,29,265 cases have been disposed of by the end of 31st October 2002. An amount of Rs. 1521.56 crore has been disbursed as compensation. CBI has filed a criminal case in the court of Chief Judicial Magistrate, Bhopal against Union Carbide Corporation and others.

89 prosecution witnesses have been examined, so far. According to information received from CBI, a revised request for extradition of Mr Warren Anderson is under final stages of preparation. For the medical, social, economic and environmental rehabilitation of Bhopal Gas victims, the Central Government had approved a five-year Action Plan with an outlay of Rs. 258 crore. This outlay was to be shared between the Government of India and the State Government of Madhya Pradesh in the ratio of 75:25. The Central Government has already released its entire share of Rs. 193.50 crore. The State Government is implementing the Action plan.

Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) was held liable for the tragedy in Bhopal. The final settlement was arrived in the Supreme Court and as a consequence UCC paid $470 million as compensation for the victims of the tragedy in full settlement of all civil claims, rights and liabilities related to and arising out of Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster. In addition, on the directions of the Supreme Court, UCC have also financed a hospital for the gas victims in Bhopal.

At the end of January 2003, a gathering of specialists who have been treating the gas victims in Bhopal over the years demanded an open-ended scientific study of the long-term effects of the disaster which continues to take its terrible toll. Groundwater contamination and higher-than-normal bronchial conditions, eye damage and early cataract, diabetic and thyroid disorders, lung cancer and congenital birth defects are still being reported among those exposed to the methyl isocyanate leak. It was alleged that a study of the effects of the gas leak conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research had been suppressed. A distinguished scientist, Dr P.M. Bhargava, claimed that the long-term effects of the Union Carbide episode were unparalleled in medical history.

About the same time, *New York Times* recalled the Bhopal gas tragedy, editorially advocating an International Right to Know protocol. Following the 1984 Union Carbide disaster the US Congress adopted legislation making it mandatory for companies to make a public disclosure of any chemical emissions that might occur within the country. On the basis of a plea advanced by human rights, environment and labour groups *New York Times* argued that in an age of globalization, it was necessary that this requirement be made worldwide.

Gas kills quickly but can also cause lingering death. 'Famine', meaning hunger, against a background of prolonged malnutrition, is slow and tortuous. Until Independence, Indian agriculture was a gamble in the monsoon and famine a periodic visitation. Until the early 1970s, there were periods when India lived 'from ship to mouth' with millions surviving on imported grain, mostly PL 480 supplies from the United States. The 1966–67 famine spurred agricultural reform and the green revolution to follow. But the escape from famine was slow, with the Maharashtra famine of 1972 serving as a grim reminder. However, by then the technique of famine relief works had been encoded in new disaster preparedness and management manuals. This entailed special food-for-work and other income generating programmes to ensure the necessary purchasing power to provide for the family, recoup assets and restore livelihoods. Health services, digging of wells, fodder banks, midday meals for children and pregnant and lactating mothers were part of the programme. Nutritional supplements would be provided and NGOs would be there to assist.

Today, famine as such is gone. Even if there is crop failure, the national grain larder is overflowing. Timely and compassionate delivery of succour is the problem. Hunger persists. It is of this that Sampad Mahapatra writes in 'Slow death in Kashipur'. This narrative is set in Kalahandi district which, with Bolangir and Koraput, the BKK belt, has long been 'starvation' prone and much in the public eye. With incessant

rain and floods damaging the meagre crop, 2001 was just another 'normal' year. That year too, the tribal villagers had to fall back on the stock survival ration, a gruel they call tanku pejo made of ground mango kernel. The first death reported was ascribed to food poisoning on account of some extraneous contaminant. But when more such deaths occurred Sampad Mahapatra, working for NDTV, was convinced that there could be more to it.

His investigations revealed callous neglect in implementation of a special Rs 54-crore tribal development project mounted after a similar crisis when the prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, visited this backward area. The emergency feeding programme for those below the poverty line and the public distribution system were not functioning too well and a mango-kernel-for-rice proposal that Mahapatra proposed was dismissed and later aborted, with no rice given to those who had hopefully deposited their mango kernels in panchayat godowns.

The official denials of starvation were carried by most local and national dailies, reducing the issue to one of 'NDTV-Star News versus the Government of Orissa' as Mahapatra puts it. His own credibility and motives were questioned, but NDTV stood by him and urged him to persist with his reportage. The matter was agitated in Parliament. The state government published an edited version of an expert committee report that blamed contamination of mango kernels as the cause of morbidity and subsequent fatalities. Finally, both the Union food minister and the state chief minister flew to Kashipur to make an on-the-spot inspection. Mahapatra claims that the VVIP route had by now been well provided with grain and relief, which led these dignitaries to deny starvation and charge sections of the media with tarnishing the national image.

The old argument about what properly constitutes a starvation death, first discussed in the Report of the 1880 Famine Commission, was rehearsed again. The proximate cause

is a fever or persistent ailment, but the background is prolonged undernourishment for lack of food or purchasing power. Traditional survival strategies have been rendered obsolete. Tribal access to forest produce is restricted and hunting prohibited.

Some years ago, the well-known journalist P. Sainath travelled around the country visiting India's poorest districts to write a moving diary of distress, empty promises, greed and exploitation. The articles that appeared in *Times of India* were later brought together in a book entitled *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*. It echoed my own 1971 experience in Maharashtra recorded in 'A blessing code-named famine'. Mahapatra too found that ultimately media publicity of distress in Kashipur brought relief in plenty. The well-springs of common humanity were tapped and private individuals and NGOs arrived with aid and comfort.

For how long? Does the same sorry cycle have to be repeated? The media has to stay with the aftermath of the crisis to monitor, analyse, exhort and mobilize opinion behind the framing and implementation of programmes that ensure sustainable development and poverty alleviation. The tribal condition in most parts of the country is pathetic. It is one thing to extol their way of life but another to ensure that they are offered better life choices and enabled to develop, consistent with their own genius, as equal citizens. The fate of the bonded and marginalized and the promise of poverty alleviation remains the biggest story of all.

The press recently reported that the Food Corporation of India (FCI) had threatened to stop grain supplies to the ministry of human resource development for school feeding programmes, charging it with failing to pay a sum of Rs 500 crore outstanding on previous deliveries during 2002. The FCI supplies approximately 2482 tonnes of wheat and rice every month for midday meal programmes in 8,40,000 schools spread over 590 districts. This not only provides a much-needed nutritional

supplement but is also an incentive for needy parents to send their wards to pre-primary school. The FCI, according to *Indian Express*, has complained that the governments of Orissa and Bihar have failed to provide verification certificates for the stocks supplied to them. The Supreme Court, however, has ruled that there can be no compromise on the school meal programme on grounds of financial constraints. The states have to get their priorities right.

Another clutch of stories in this volume concerns issues of ethnicity and identity, shading into insurgency. Whether in Assam, Sri Lanka or Jammu and Kashmir, trauma and fear have governed the lives of people for prolonged periods. The Nellie massacre serves as shorthand for Assam's struggle to retain its distinct cultural identity against a tide of in-migrants from across the border. The war by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for a Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka is a similar manifestation of ethnic and subaltern assertions within larger processes of nation-building. Jammu and Kashmir exhibits some of these characteristics but is more akin to the insurgency or 'freedom struggle' on which the Tamil Tigers embarked in 1983.

The partition of India converted a long-standing wave of migration from the densely packed plains of East Bengal into what were seen as relatively open spaces in Assam from an inter-provincial movement to an illicit cross-border violation of an international boundary. Both push and pull factors were at work. Adding to concerns about increasing pressure on the land and forests, the continuing ingress of Bengali-speaking Muslims from what had become East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, presaged a demographic tilt that threatened Assamese electoral and cultural interests. The plains tribals also found themselves being squeezed out of the tribal belts and blocks that had been reserved for them within Assam after Independence.

Sanjoy Hazarika recalls the words of Assam's census commissioner in 1931, warning of a 'silent invasion' of the Brahmaputra Valley. Half a century later, the All-Assam Student's Union (AASU) launched a movement to 'detect, delete [from the electoral rolls] and deport' all foreign nationals. The tribal and other minorities in Assam rallied around the cause. The intensity and strength of the movement surprised most people outside the North-East who had until then little awareness or interest in this remote region. The media too had remained 'mainstream', largely oblivious of the 'periphery' which was vaguely known to be engulfed in insurgencies and struggles for local autonomy.

Obviously then, 'breaking news' from the unreported North-East surprised and even today to some extent continues to surprise those living in the Indian heartland. This imbalance in coverage remains to be corrected. The Nellie massacre was in its own way linked to the boycott of the 1983 election called by ASSU, partly spontaneous, partly engineered, Hazarika believes. The local Tiwa (Lalung) plains tribals gave vent to their frustration against all the outsiders and settlers who had usurped their lands. The carnage was brutal. No one knows how many thousands were killed. No inquiry followed to ascertain the causes and course of events and fix responsibility.

Hazarika argues that the tide of in-migration cannot be stopped but can be tamed through licensed movements of in-migrant labour on work permits. A more positive long-term policy towards Bangladesh in relation to border management, trade and assistance in its economic development is recommended. Mindsets must change. What better instrumentality to promote understanding and cooperation than the media.

The Naga peace and reconciliation movement underpinning the continuing peace process between the Government of India and the major Naga underground faction has not received the

coverage it deserves. Nor have the many significant steps in nation-building and development under way in the North-East. These possibly hold out lessons for Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country. These processes of social change, truth and reconciliation and gradual integration within an emerging framework of a common future merit media attention. There is a big story here. It may not 'break' explosively, but it is happening out there.

India has had its share of insurgency and continues to suffer from it. Its involvement in the ethnic strife in Sri Lanka was to end in tragedy with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Anita Pratap, an intrepid journalist, worked on the LTTE story from both ends, India and Sri Lanka, and stayed with it over many bloody years. It was as a Chennai-based correspondent of the Kolkata magazine *Sunday* that she sensed a deeper and possibly more sinister meaning in the burning down of the Jaffna Public Library, one of the richest repositories of Tamil manuscripts anywhere. She soon traced it to smouldering ethic tensions and started tracking the story that was to break two years later in 1983 and consume the island in violence.

Anita Pratap was able to build a good rapport with the key actors on all three sides of the triangle: the Indian high commissioner in Colombo, the Sri Lanka national security minister and the Eelam groups, particularly the LTTE supreme commander, Pirabhakaran. She kept faith with all of them, not betraying these confidences and maintaining strict impartiality without a trace of national bias. Her reporting was accurate and incisive and earned her threats and official scrutiny. But she maintained her cool and refused to disclose her source when she reported that India was brokering secret talks between the Sri Lanka government and the Tamil militants in Thimphu.

A journalist needs to protect her sources else no one will talk for fear of consequences from parting with sensitive or confidential information. This has long posed a dilemma for media persons. Yet the journalist is not above the law and if

disclosure of the news source is sought to track or prevent a crime or crisis, refusal by the reporter or media organization may be construed as wilful obstruction. Journalists have a different view of the matter and have sometimes had to pay the price of their conviction.

Anita Pratap was justified in declining to disclose her source to RAW, which suspected that the leakage had occurred internally. But there is a via media when a matter is before a court or commission of inquiry. In such cases the media has the option of disclosing the source in confidence to the judge or tribunal so that it is able to make an appreciation of the weight to be accorded to the disclosure. This way, the public interest may be served without the media organization being guilty of betraying confidence.

Threats and anonymous calls are another matter. Here the intention is to intimidate and silence the reporter. Such threats could be bluff, but are not to be taken lightly. The authorities should be informed. It is then incumbent on them to provide suitable protection and maintain vigilance so that things do not get out of hand and the culprit is apprehended. These are professional hazards and it requires grit and dedication to withstand such pressures.

The Indian high commissioner in Colombo sought to divert Anita Pratap from covering the operations of the Indian Peacekeeping Force. However, the Indian Army commander in Batticaloa encouraged her to do so. He acted on the premise that an honest appraisal of a difficult task being carried out quietly and uncomplainingly by his men against heavy odds could be a force multiplier. That it was. Notwithstanding this coverage, the shadowy and feared LTTE chief, Pirabhakaran, agreed to be interviewed by her. He had met her before, probably read her, and respected her professional integrity. This is a quality that inspires confidence and trust and enables a reporter to meet and understand even strong antagonists who believe their views and version will be objectively portrayed.

Cut to Jammu and Kashmir. This too is a tangled story of blood and tears. Like Anita Pratap, Muzamil Jaleel is conscious of the many truths that underline the passions and pain involved. For him 'breaking news' lies in deciphering and articulating an overhanging, pregnant silence. Everybody knows. None dare speak. Walls have ears. Retribution is swift and brutal.

How does one report civil strife and insurgency where fear is reinforced by mistrust, alienation and even fanaticism. What is the role of the reporter or media in situations of extreme confrontation when each side tends to assume those not with it are against it? Suspected informers or deviants are not looked upon kindly. Sometimes there is little or no neutral ground. In Jammu and Kashmir, as in Punjab earlier, newspaper establishments were attacked or bombed. Dozens of media managers, stringers, newsagents and hawkers have been killed. In Jammu and Kashmir at least seven media persons have been gunned down in the past decade and many more attacked or threatened by militant groups. The risks are high.

In Punjab, armed militants would send 'press notes' or bandh calls that correspondents were compelled to dispatch. Bolder editors would then decide whether or not they should be published and the manner of treatment. Others, whether out of fear or sympathy, would print whatever they received. As happens when there is censorship, discerning readers would in due course learn to read between the lines and discount the contents appropriately. The notices eulogizing 'martyrs' and 'clarifications' issued by those charged with being official informers or agents were daily staple. The Hind Samachar Group in Jalandhar and its owner-editors suffered grievous casualties. Dozens associated with it were killed. The press also reported allegations of human rights excesses by the police. The government responded by trying to impose pre-censorship, which was strongly resisted and prudently withdrawn.

The Press Council took notice of these developments and set up an inquiry committee to establish the facts regarding the media and militancy in Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. Its report, 'Crisis and Credibility', was published in 1993. This included a section on human rights charges levelled against the Army that the Chief of Army Staff requested the Press Council to investigate on the ground that contradictions and clarifications issued by Army public relations were simply not being carried.

Kashmir erupted in January 1990. Sad to say, the Indian press literally fled the scene. The 'national' newspapers, AIR and Doordarshan, and the news agencies either withdrew their correspondents altogether or left behind low-level stringers to cope as best they could. The local press had nowhere to turn and anyone who resisted the militant's diktat was gunned down or attacked. It was unfairly accused of being a mouthpiece of the militants. The fact is that every editor functioned with a pistol at his head. A leading Srinagar publisher remarked that he was only the nominal editor as armed militant groups wielded his pen. Mohammad Shaban, editor of *Al Safa*, was gunned down in his office as he dared step out of line. Everybody knew what had happened. None would speak. The then mirwaiz, Moulvi Farooq, was similarly assassinated and buried as a 'martyr' by those who killed him.

It is this golden silence that Muzamil Jaleel has courageously and movingly recounted in reporting on the more recent unfolding of the Kashmir story. As he says, 'The challenge of reporting the conflict lies in the ability to decipher silence and understand the meaning behind every spoken word.' Yet when the story is told, the truth appears unbelievable to many. The further dilemma is that local Kashmiri Muslims are 'part of the story' they report. According to Jaleel, 'The separatists believe that we have a responsibility to take their side because we are their people, while the government wants us to prove

our impartiality by supporting its claims in Kashmir.' Hence silence is best. But then, after some time, even silence becomes partisan.

Jaleel tells of the assassination of Abdul Gani Lone and the Hurriyat's appropriation of his burial. His sons and political heirs expressed their outrage by fielding four Peoples' Conference candidates as electoral proxies in the guise of 'rebels'. He goes on to dig into the truth underlying the contrasting enthusiasm and election boycott in two adjacent constituencies on polling day. Army 'coercion' to vote, the people's desire to give democracy a chance and local rivalries were manifest. His own surmise is that the results showed a measured preference not for one party or another but for that candidate who seemed farthest from Delhi. That was the appeal of the Peoples Democratic Party under Mufti Sayeed and his daughter Mehbooba Mufti.

Will the Mufti's healing touch succeed? Jaleel is pessimistic. He reports meeting some jehadi 'boys', religious zealots, all but one from Pakistan. They were steeled to sacrifice their lives in fidayeen (suicide) attacks as Momins (true Muslims) in a holy war. The recent Jammu and Kashmir poll and Mufti's elevation of office meant nothing to them. The jehad would go on.

Jaleel may be right in a sense but is possibly mistaken in his reading of the bigger picture. The future will tell.

It is a far cry from insurgency to cricket, which once conjured visions of gentlemen playing the game in every sense of the term in the sunlight and serenity of green fields. The world of sport has, alas, changed. What were once games of skill, grit and endurance laced with friendly competition have become gladiatorial contests with no holds barred. Sportsmanship has yielded to egos and national chauvinism in which victory and defeat have become matters of honour or disgrace. The transition from an amateur to a professional and commercial status has transformed the sporting context.

Sport is now a high-value career. Winners and achievers walk away with kudos, stardom and substantial prize money. They become icons and role models and earn vast sums to endorse the brand equity of automobiles, soft drinks, clothing, cellular phones, anything. For the organizers, sponsors and clubs, sport has become an industry; for governments a matter of intense national pride and glory. Fans indulge in hooliganism, clubs buy players for fortunes and outcomes of major events are occasions for national celebration or mourning. India–Pakistan cricket contests have generated frenzy. And the marketing of the 2003 cricket World Cup was a story in itself.

Consider three events that occurred within the space of a few days of one another just as the World Cup commenced. There was a crackdown on bookies in various parts of the country. Shane Warne, the ace Australian bowler, ranked as one of the all-time greats in cricket history, was sent home from Johannesburg for apparently failing a dope test. And a senior ruling party leader speaking at an election rally somewhere in Himachal was reported as saying the poll would take place on the same day that India and Pakistan were to play their match and that his party's victory would be akin to India defeating Pakistan!

The media, especially television, has pushed viewership far beyond hallowed grounds and stadia to phenomenally large national and international audiences. This in turn has priced up all games. Event managers team up with sponsors to advertise and build up the 'product' which they then sell to the highest bidders worldwide. Fantastic sums are involved. The mix of big money and big sport has attracted bookies who then indulge those who would speculate on games of skill and chance. Some do it for fun, others to make a fortune. From this it has been a short step, alas, to doping and match-fixing. It is of the latter that Pradeep Magazine writes, and that too about what was until recently considered the most gentlemanly of sports: cricket.

As a seasoned sports correspondent, Pradeep Magazine's suspicions were first aroused by the 'confusion' over who won the toss in a West Indies–India one-day match in Jodhpur. He had reported the match and, despite evidence to the contrary, the 'mistake' was attributed to the Windies captain's call being heard wrong. Nothing worse was imagined or attributed by anybody. Yet, as Magazine notes, suspicions lingered.

Then in 1997, *Pioneer* assigned Magazine to cover the Indian cricket team's West Indies tour. It was in Jamaica that someone he first took for an Indian cricket buff accosted him at his hotel. The acquaintance was renewed at the next stop, in Trinidad. By now Magazine had heard about bookies foraying into the world of cricket and, on spotting his man again, struck up a friendship and began to play his quarry. Having earlier revealed that he was a Delhi businessman, Anil now disclosed the nature of his business. He asked Magazine how well he knew the leading Indian players. Told that he was 'very close' to some of them, Anil broached and clinched a deal.

Scenting a big story, Magazine passed on some 'tips' through a couple of Test matches after getting clearance from his editor to play along as an 'informer'. The information sought was the players' insider views about the state of the pitch, the team composition for particular tests, the strategy planned and so forth. Once he had garnered sufficient knowledge of how the bookies operated, Magazine wrote a piece in *Pioneer* exposing the process employed to corrupt the game. He mentioned no names, only the modus operandi. The story evoked interest but did not create much of a stir until one of the Indian players went on record, pointing a finger at famous names. The cricket world was in turmoil. The South African captain admitted a nexus with bookies. Certain Indian players were banned; others were later exonerated.

The frenzy over cricket remains; so do doubts. Politics has entered sport. India has declined to play with Pakistan. New contract rules are being put in place. The 2003 cricket World

Cup has seen various cricket boards and national sides refusing to play in one venue or another on grounds of 'security' or 'racism'. All this is a far cry from the proud motto of the Olympic Games, which sought to combine physical excellence with camaraderie. Earlier the game was the thing, not the winning. Now winning is all.

Corruption grows on what it feeds. Power, ego, politics, criminality and consumerist greed are among its principal drivers. The notion that poverty breeds corruption and that economic prosperity obviates it is not borne out by facts. The poor have an innate honesty and moral code though they do fall to temptation, mostly in order to survive. Poverty is, however, relative and those that have often want more. Corruption is the bane of many developing societies and, to its shame, India ranks low in Transparency International's ratings.

Over the years, corruption has grown in India. Speed money to overcome red tape or beat the system is one thing. Over and beyond that, excessive regulation, high levels of taxation, the cost of politics and the breakdown of the criminal justice system are among the factors that have contributed to social degeneration and the erosion of values. Immunity has bred impunity. Money buys, and the cynic would have it that everybody has a price. The imposition of prohibition in Bombay and Madras states in the early 1950s incubated corruption, with easy and widespread evasion by bootleggers with the connivance of the powers that be. This engendered disrespect both for the law and its guardians. It marked the rise of liquor dons. The mafia has proliferated over the years and the dons of the underworld have forged close links with the worlds of politics, real estate, commerce, entertainment, narcotics, money laundering, gun-running, you name it. Tired of being proxies, kingmakers now want to play king.

The 1970s mark a watershed. With the Congress split and the first signs of the ending of single party dominance, electoral politics became increasingly competitive. Inflation and declining

values raised the thresholds of greed and tolerance of malfeasance. This writer had the experience of being unable to buy a residential plot by cheque against a valid receipt, instead of by making a payment of at least 60 per cent in black money as was the norm. He was later accosted by the same broker who triumphantly offered a completely white money transaction. Intrigued, he probed further to discover that 'all white' meant 20 per cent in black. The broker patiently explained, as though to a particularly dull child, that 20 per cent black was as good as white!

Electoral fund raising is widely perceived as the font of corruption. There has been much talk about electoral reform and state funding of parties but no progress on the ground. Candidates and parties tend to raise huge sums of money to finance elections at levels far above the prescribed ceilings. These amounts have to be recouped and repaid and the coffers filled anew for the next round. Defections and coalition support have also been known to be purchased, and the asking price is not falling.

By the 1980s, the focus of fund raising, at least for ruling parties, had moved from private business to the public sector and regulatory choke points. The over- and under-invoicing of exports and imports, foreign exchange remittances through informal hawala transactions, money laundering and the lodging of ill-gotten wealth in offshore tax havens were gradually systematized. It was in this environment of sleaze that impetus was given to efforts to siphon money from defence contracts. Two factors reinforced this trend. Defence contracts are huge and the transactions by their very nature tend to be shrouded in secrecy. Enter Bofors and, later, Tehelka.

After a freeze on defence modernization for quite some years, the Indian Army felt the need to augment and upgrade its artillery. The usual drill was put in motion on the basis of specified qualitative requirements. Four international bids, all of well-known makes, were in contention. After elaborate trials

and prolonged negotiations, Bofors was awarded the contract, the largest export order in Swedish history and one that saved this famous gun-maker from shutting shop. Such deals are not exclusively commercial. Foreign governments push for preferment for national vendors. Olof Palme, the Swedish prime minister, spoke to his counterpart, Rajiv Gandhi. Other contractors no doubt also pulled strings at the highest level.

This is not unusual. But, as always, competitors and political rivals tended to suggest that the Indian Army had been sold short and the country's security could be imperilled. The Army defended the howitzer, which more than amply proved itself during the Kargil war. The major issue, however, revolved around allegations of money having been paid into secret Swiss bank accounts to grease the deal by shadowy figures with a conduit to the highest quarters in India. It was at this juncture that Swedish Radio, following an independent line of investigation, reported that the equivalent of at least Rs 64 crore had changed hands. That spark lit the fire.

In the midst of the negotiations, the Indian government asked Bofors to do away with middlemen and their own agent, Win Chadha. This implied dealing directly with the Government of India at the bureaucratic and political levels. Subsequent disclosures revealed payments along two tracks. Those to Win Chadha were described as 'winding up charges'. The other amounts would seem to have been political payments.

The scandal rocked the nation. Parliament was in uproar, insisting on an inquiry that the government did all it could to delay, dilute and abort. Chitra Subramaniam, the *Hindu* correspondent in Geneva, pursued the story relentlessly, step by step in what long seemed a hopeless chase. Perseverance, a cold anger over what seemed a callous national wrong, meticulous investigation and grit led her to unravel the mystery. An equally troubled whistle-blower in Sweden helped her along, clue by clue. If Woodward and Bernstein of *Washington Post* had 'Deep Throat' come to their aid, Subramaniam had 'Sting'.

He gave her a pile of prize documents and helped interpret some of them. The other end of the puzzle lay in mysterious Swiss bank accounts held in fictitious names. The scent led to faraway places. Here, 'Snowman' came forward to lend a helping hand.

The chase reads like a thriller. The stakes were high and Subramaniam, operating single-handedly, but with the support of her editors in India and her husband, soldiered on despite birthing two babies, receiving threats to her life, being taken to court and having her bank account broken into. Sting gave her documents of the Swedish National Audit Bureau that had conducted the investigation in Sweden, and the diary of Martin Ardbo of Bofors. These referred to talks with 'Gandhi Trustee lawyer', and 'R' and 'Q', interpreted as Rajiv and an Italian business representative in India, Ottavio Quattrocchi. The latter, a highly placed Swedish source said, held the key to the story. Snowman briefed Subramaniam about the CBI's failure to press the case in the Swiss courts and tipped her off about the then Indian foreign minister, Solanki, writing to his Swiss counterpart, requesting him to wind up the Bofors case in Switzerland.

Parliament demanded a joint parliamentary committee that essentially got nowhere. The government claimed it was being framed in a conspiracy by anti-national elements. There were pressures on the press. *Hindu* withdrew but Subramaniam got immediate offers from *Indian Express* and *Statesman*. A Defamation Bill was introduced but had to be withdrawn. The Bofors howitzer carried the day at Kargil to great media acclaim. However, the political stink remains. Both Olof Palme and Rajiv Gandhi were assassinated. The Bofors case drags on.

Bofors led to Tehelka. The idea that middlemen or agents are conduits for commercial corruption is simplistic and untrue. It is equally fallacious to imagine that they perform no useful function and that the commissions they earn merely add to the cost and, if eliminated, would constitute a saving. On the

contrary, agents constitute a necessary and valuable part of the marketing chain. 'Eliminating' middlemen therefore merely drove them underground and beckoned corporate representatives to enter the portals of the secretariat to negotiate directly with civilian officers and the military brass.

Many scandals followed Bofors. As before, the investigations were tardy and few leads pressed to a conclusion. This gave rise to allegations of cover-up. The investigative agencies have over the years been increasingly politicized and rendered subservient to the government of the day. Independent officers have been thwarted and transferred. These trends have bred public cynicism and created a feeling that the country can be looted and bled with impunity. Disorderly scenes have paralysed Parliament and the state legislatures with members storming into the well of the House, compelling repeated adjournments for days, or staging noisy walkouts. Debate has been stalled for weeks.

Taking its cue from the fact that this dangerous drift bodes ill for the country, Tehelka, a relatively new Delhi-based portal, determined to expose the rot. It set out to prove that the issue was not merely about this scandal or that, but the fact that the whole system was being hollowed from within. Even as national security and the war against terror were being bruited as the supreme challenge, Tehelka decided to show that the defence ministry was itself stricken with the cancer of corruption. Guardians had turned poacher while the 'brave jawan' was being asked to stake his life in extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

The motive, Tarun Tejpal states, was to arouse public outrage and thereby compel the authorities to clean the Augean stables through a dramatic media exposure that itself provided complete proof of malfeasance and moral decay. A sting operation was mounted. Two Tehelka staffers, Aniruddha Bahal and Samuel Mathew, posed as arms dealers representing a fictitious London company with thermal imaging cameras and

other equipment known to be on the Indian Army's shopping list on offer. The ruse worked. Graft and greed had obviously dulled the conscience and there was an air of brazen braggadocio and a nonchalant sense of immunity. The presidents of the BJP and Samata Party, no less, some defence ministry bureaucrats and even serving and retired military officers were readily attracted to what seemed a delicious honey pot. The venue for these encounters ranged from the defence minister's living room (as his residence is open house to various groups and also serves as the office of the Samata Party) to the chamber of the BJP president at the party office. At another level, wine and women were introduced. The conversations and demands were explicit. And every episode was captured on camera. Nothing was left to the imagination.

The quarry walked into the trap unhesitatingly, with little furtiveness about their actions. Money was seen passing. The favours sought or offered were explicit. As the months wore on, the Tehelka team feared detention. Utmost secrecy was maintained and when a sufficient body of self-incriminating evidence had been recorded, some 100 hours of film was painstakingly edited down to four hours. This done, a high-level audience of influential personages and the media was hurriedly invited to a showing at the spacious Imperial Hotel ballroom on the morning of D-Day, 13 March 2001. The noon screening hit the country like a bombshell. Tehelka felt a great burden off its chest. Parliament and the country went into a tizzy.

An embarrassed government took the plea that Operation West End was a conspiracy to harm the country and cripple the economy. The tapes had been doctored and the portal's conduct was criminal. Innocent victims had been framed. The defence minister denied anything untoward in the general process of military procurement and resigned thereafter pending an inquiry. The BJP president also resigned. Army headquarters ordered a court of inquiry into the conduct of the military

officers named and the defence ministry instituted an administrative inquiry in respect of the concerned civil officials. The demand for a joint parliamentary committee was resisted but the government went on to appoint a commission of inquiry under retired Supreme Court judge, Justice K. Venkatswami.

Tehelka turned over the complete unedited tapes to the Army court of inquiry and, later, to the Venkatswami Commission. Tarun Tejpal explained that call girls were used to underline the utter depravity of those on the take and to nail down the evidence. However, their identities were not revealed and this footage was not used in the edited version that was screened. Nevertheless, he regretted inducting these women without their being told that they were being used in a sting operation and admitted that their presence would have been better avoided.

A wounded government turned the screws on Tehelka. It was raided, questioned by the investigatory agencies and pilloried. Its financiers, two young venture capitalists, were hounded viciously and put out of business. Tehelka found itself unable to function or pay its staff and was reduced to a shell. The staff stood by loyally as long as it could and then was laid off or quit.The portal, rather than those whom it had exposed, was put in the dock in an inversion of due process. The commission probably needed no more than a few more months to conclude its inquiry when Justice Venkatswami submitted his resignation after objection was taken to his being concurrently appointed to another tribunal by the government on the recommendation of the Chief Justice of India. Venkatswami was aggrieved that the government failed to defend him more vigorously than it did.

Another retired Supreme Court judge, Justice S.N. Phukan, was thereafter appointed to fill the vacancy and having examined the material already compiled stated that he did not intend to re-record the evidence afresh and would presumably proceed from where his predecessor had left off. He, however,

did later agree to send sixteen Tehelka tapes to London for expert forensic examination in response to indignant pleadings by some of those caught on camera that the tapes had been doctored and they had been framed by the portal. In any event, the completion of the commission's report has been further delayed. Tehelka has stated that it has nothing more or new to add and will therefore be unable to cooperate in any further proceedings. As far as the people of India are concerned, justice has for whatever reason once again been delayed.

Not all journalists will agree that the course adopted by Tehelka was consistent with the best journalistic practice. There is an issue of ends and means. However, the portal has come clean and none of the charges levelled against it has really stuck. But if it has transgressed the law, it must face the consequences. Yet, nothing extenuates the 'system', particularly those caught in flagrante delicto. It is they who need to explain their conduct and must be proceeded against if the evidence so warrants. The politicians may not be criminally culpable but they cannot escape a certain moral obloquy. The nation cannot let another scandal pass and accept that it is business as usual.

Soon after the Tehelka story broke, the prime minister described Operation West End as a 'wake-up call'. What had been exposed went beyond security. The ease with which persons posing as arms merchants gained access to defence personnel and politicians showed how far the cancer had spread. He promised to 'clean up the dirt and pursue every lead'. Subsequent actions belie that promise. The terms of reference of the commission of inquiry was itself flawed to the extent that it was also asked 'to inquire into all aspects relating to the making and publication of these allegations'. This makes Tehelka an accused party. Rules and procedures have been bent to discredit and destroy the portal. Sadly, the investigatory agencies and other institutions of state have been suborned for partisan ends. The theory that First Global, the venture capital firm that helped the Tehelka start-up, was conspiring to break

the Indian stock market does not stand impartial scrutiny. Yet the couple who built up this company and made it a success have been ruthlessly persecuted and all but broken with a perseverance and determination worthy of a better cause.

Tehelka's Operation West End is arguably about the biggest Indian media newsbreak since Independence. Those who point a finger at the portal need to recognize that it is the failure, at various times and at certain critical moments, of the executive, legislative and, alas, the judicial branch that caused Tarun Tejpal and his colleagues to push the envelope.

The Tehelka story broke just about the time the reports of the four task forces on the findings of the Kargil Review Committee were adopted by the Group of Ministers and cleared for implementation. The task force on higher defence management had looked into defence procurement policy and steps had been initiated to rationalize it and make the process more transparent. The Tehelka exposé reinforced that process and it was decided that middlemen should be permitted subject to their licensing and regulation. This writer was invited by the defence minister ad interim in the early part of 2001 to review the defence information system and introduce greater openness. This too was a by-product of Tehelka. It is another matter that that report has yet to be published let alone implemented!

The notion that all defence purchases are dipped in scandal is greatly exaggerated. Remarks culled from reports of the Comptroller and Auditor-General and selective leaks sometimes suggest that there is much to question. But some of these issues are torn out of context and rival contractors and disgruntled elements are always there to prime parliamentarians and the press to cry foul in a bid to reopen settled decisions. One must beware of the power and reach of disinformation. Some accounting or procedural criticisms as to why certain 'urgent' stores or equipment arrived after the specified emergency, as for example long after Kargil, or were procured from single-source vendors, are misplaced. They are akin to the review of a

famous symphony orchestra by a stand-in music critic who wrote that he enjoyed the concert but failed to understand why six second fiddles were required when three would have done. Further, the harpist could have been dispensed with as he came in only once, and that too for not more than seventeen seconds in a composition that lasted thirty minutes! Ordnance obviously needs to be ordered before hostilities and such purchases should not be criticized because the war ended too soon.

Too much tends to be classified on security grounds. As mentioned earlier, security can often be a cover for things that those in authority would rather not have come under public scrutiny. The new Freedom of Information Act suffers from this infirmity: too much is held back in the name of 'security'. Indeed, openness can sometimes enhance security. It certainly makes for better governance.

Chitra Subramaniam's account of Bofors also raises an issue on which the Freedom of Information Act is silent. This is the role of the whistle-blower. Officials are sworn to secrecy and can be arraigned for violating their oath. However, the law does not provide that falsehood and illegality should be condoned despite patent injury to the public interest. The recent Enron and Arthur Andersen cases in the United States show how senior corporate officials, who in a sense are public trustees, abused their position to shield wrongdoing. In both these cases, as in others, conscientious insiders have sounded alarms and encouraged corrective action to no avail. It is only as a last resort that they blew the whistle. Are they to be condemned? Judicial review might hopefully chart the way forward.

As a footnote to the Bofors and Tehelka exposures, Shankar Aiyar ran a story, 'Smoking guns', in *India Today* (3 March 2003) looking at fourteen major swindles in the past fifteen years, involving Rs 22,376 crore of public money, 221 cases and 149 charge sheets. The story notes that 'till date there have been just 10 convictions'. The conclusion: 'Governments

sloganeer about curbing corruption, but nothing changes on the ground.' Business as usual is bad news for India.

Possibly even more disturbing, as it touches the very soul and idea of India, is what Teesta Setalvad writes of in 'Communal violence: From select pogroms to full-blown genocide'. From the Mumbai riots of 1992, in the wake of the demolition of the Babri Masjid, to the Godhra-Gujarat holocaust of 2002, there has been a steady lowering of the threshold of tolerance and acceptance of the most brutal and sinister communal violence and depravity bordering on ethnic cleansing and genocide. Years of terror in Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of India have inured many to draconian action, no questions asked, in the name of security. The events of 9/11 further led to the demonization of what is termed 'political Islam', but has all too often come to mean just ordinary Muslims, in the War on Terror in whose name many crudities have passed muster.

Teesta Setalvad's journal, *Communalism Combat*, which she founded after leaving the mainstream media, was the creation of the Mumbai riots. To that extent, what is practised here is avowedly advocacy and crusading journalism which is not to be judged by the standards of general interest media. It not merely narrates the story but goes on to pursue it to its logical conclusion in search of legal and political redress. It is the deeper investigatory and evidentiary quality of the reportage that singles it out. Here, the journalist is manifestly an activist and clearly on the side of the victim, striving 'to counter the riot in the mind before it spills out in blood on the street'. She enunciates the compulsion to straddle two realities: 'to be both a media practitioner and a citizen concerned with pre-empting violence, often at the same time'.

There were other journals of advocacy that took the opposite view and virtually justified the horrors of Gujarat on ideological or partisan grounds.

In Gujarat itself, the media was split. Some powerful vernacular papers were blatantly partisan and incited violence and hatred with impunity in total disregard of every canon of responsible journalism. Other local papers, the national media, by and large, and the principal television channels told the story as it was to the consternation and increasing annoyance of the authorities, state and Central. Strenuous efforts were made to shoot the messenger. The matter is well documented in the report of the Fact-Finding Team appointed by the Editors Guild of India entitled 'Rights and Wrongs: Ordeal by Fire in the Killing Fields of Gujarat'.

There was a patent though stubbornly unadmitted breakdown of the Constitution in Gujarat.

The media cannot transform the world nor attempt to play God. But it can be a great power for good. The freedom and reach it enjoys is a precious democratic instrumentality and public trust that carries with it an equivalent responsibility. It is within these bounds that the Indian media must continue to focus on what is truly important, probing beneath and beyond the obvious or immediate to reveal the underlying causes and deeper processes at work.

An Auschwitz in Bhopal

RAAJKUMAR KESWANI

It proved to be a fatal accident for Mohammad Ashraf Khan, a plant operator at Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal. On 24 December 1981 he was asked to replace a defective flange connecting two pipes, a routine maintenance operation in the phosgene-manufacturing unit. But no sooner had he removed the flange than the deadly phosgene gushed towards him. Though he was rushed to hospital, doctors could not prevent the poison from spreading in his body. He died in the local Hamidia Hospital the next morning.

Three years later this very plant led to the death of another member of Ashraf's family: his four-and-a-half-year-old son, Arshad. Arshad, along with his mother, Sajda Bano, and brother, Shoyeb, was at the Bhopal railway station on 3 December 1984 when the deadly methyl isocyanate (MIC) leaked from the Union Carbide plant. They were returning from a visit to his grandparents.

But Arshad did not die alone. Hundreds perished instantly as a result of the MIC leak from the Union Carbide plant that fateful night. Thousands died later.

The Union Carbide pesticide plant was established on Bersia Road in 1969. It was regarded as a prestigious unit of a famous multinational company, commonly identified with the well-known brand of Eveready batteries. The first signal of danger came on 24 November 1978 when a huge fire broke out in its alpha-nepthol store. Nobody suspected foul play, neither the residents of nearby colonies, who believed the plant only

manufactured the friendly torch batteries they used, nor politicians and bureaucrats, who knew what was being manufactured. However, the black cloud that hung over Bhopal for several hours served notice that all was not well.

Life got back on track after a while, though the foul smell of the burning nepthol left people wondering if the situation could have been worse had firefighters from the municipal corporation and Bharat Heavy Electricals not reached the site in time. The question on everyone's mind—Could what had happened recur?—remained unanswered and was forgotten with the passage of time.

I too was part of the crowds that gathered outside the Union Carbide plant that evening. I was a small-time journalist, running *Rapat*, a little-known Hindi weekly newspaper of my own. In a city with a population of nearly 6 lakh, it had no significant impact on society because its circulation ranged around 2000 copies, selling a maximum of 6000 on one occasion.

My reaction to the incident too was little different from that of others. I allowed the event to dull in my memory. Yet even amidst the daily struggle for survival, one question kept nagging me: Could this be more dangerous than I had envisaged?

A chance meeting with an old friend working with Union Carbide nudged me out of this indifference and inertia. Uncertain and wary about the nature of the chemicals being used in the plant, he wanted to change his job. He had seen some of his colleagues suffering from several ailments due to exposure to deadly chemicals like phosgene and MIC. Still it took the death of my friend Ashraf for me to realize the gravity of the situation. Thus it was that in December 1981 I decided to get to the bottom of the mystery of possible danger from chemical processes within Union Carbide.

To investigate Union Carbide's affairs was not an easy task. Especially for someone like me, with no knowledge of

chemicals, no background in science and no contacts in Union Carbide after the only friend in the plant quit his job. But I found friends very soon: Bashir Ullah and Shankar Malviya, two firebrand union leaders whose jobs had been terminated by Union Carbide for allegedly misbehaving with the management. Their jobs had gone, but the fire within them still raged and they continued to head a workers' union in the plant, one more vocal than others on issues of workers' welfare and safety.

Interestingly, even as I was searching for a helping hand within Union Carbide, Bashir and Shankar too were looking for a friend in the media. They were upset that they were not getting proper coverage in the local press vis-à-vis their employers. Every statement of the workers' unions against the management's anti-employee policies and scant regard for safety measures was taken as a routine union ballad against the employer. The logo of Union Carbide, with its white lettering against a red background stamped on the Eveready batteries, seemed to reassure everyone. It seemed to say *I stand for light against darkness*. The local media, like everyone else who mattered in the system, bought this line, much to their embarrassment after the tragedy in 1984.

To consolidate this faith, Union Carbide ensured frequent contact with the media. Its public relations officer regularly visited newspaper offices to befriend journalists. The company made sure its annual cocktail party was an occasion to remember and it hosted friendly cricket matches with a specially created Journalists' XI during these bashes. More often than not, Union Carbide would lose to the journalists' team. But win or lose, it was always celebration time for both teams amid the free flow of beer and wine.

When I began investigating why the powers that be were overtly kind to Union Carbide, I stumbled upon one shocking revelation after another. Between September 1982 and June 1984, I published the entire list of company beneficiaries. This

was used by the national and international media in the wake of the tragedy to highlight the nexus between the state and the company. Hence it is a matter of common knowledge that a large number of politicians and bureaucrats were receiving favours from Union Carbide. Suffice to say that a number of relatives of politicians in power and serving bureaucrats were hired by the company on high salaries. A retired inspector-general of police was given the security contract. The company's beautifully located guest house on Shyamla Hills, facing the Upper Lake, was a great attraction for top-ranking politicians. Arjun Singh, the then chief minister, was a regular visitor and others like Madhav Rao Scindia had stayed there a couple of times.

I approached the state agriculture department, the directorate of industrial health and safety and the pollution control board to get information about Union Carbide, but officials would only sing paeans about the company, its management and extraordinary safety systems. When I pointed to earlier lapses in the plant, they would compare it with other local industries which were worse violators of safety norms.

Even doctors in Hamidia Hospital, attached to the Gandhi Medical College, were not forthcoming about the Union Carbide workers who were frequently taken there for treatment following exposure to chemicals. Union Carbide had funded a special private ward of its own within the hospital premises so that everything remained under cover. Certain senior doctors were the company's 'friends'.

All this created difficulties in finding out the truth about the plant and its operations, which I believed could lead to a disaster at any time. However, I was lucky to find one or other disgruntled official or clerk in government offices and some sympathetic junior doctors in the hospitals. I started taking more interest in the activities of the union led by Bashir and Shankar and thus made more friends within the company. The publication of news items about union activities in some local

newspapers further strengthened the workers' faith in me. On the flip side, following one such publication, a reporter friend was shifted from the field to the desk.

Union Carbide employees helped me procure copies of the plant's operation manual and other relevant information and also managed to smuggle me half a dozen times inside the factory to see how the safety regulations advertised in the company documents were being implemented. To my horror I found workers handling chemicals without the prescribed gloves and working in MIC and phosgene hazard zones without gas masks. Hissing and gurgling sounds emitted by the pipe network did not allay my apprehensions.

However, what I found most alarming in the company documents was that phosgene and MIC were one and a half times and two and a half times respectively heavier than air. This meant that if either leaked, it would tend to settle and not be dispersed by winds. If it leaked on a major scale, an eventuality that could not be ruled out, the entire population of Bhopal could be at risk.

Though agitated, I wondered if I was jumping the gun. I decided to study the matter more deeply and visited the local British Council library to develop a better understanding. I went to a professor in a local science college who had been appointed to inquire into the cause of the gas leak that led to Ashraf's death. He agreed with me that phosgene and MIC were deadly gases and could harm the workers but insisted that they could never leak out in amounts large enough to threaten the entire population of Bhopal. Winds would disperse the gas even if it leaked out, he argued. But the layman in me thought it was only common sense that the heavy gases would settle just above the ground. I was not convinced by any other argument. Moreover these arguments and counter-arguments seemed to be based on the character of phosgene and not that of MIC since there was almost no literature available about the latter in any of the books available in the science college or the British

Council library. The only source of information on MIC was the Union Carbide manual.

I was further convinced of the dangers posed when I read a report in the Hindi newspaper *Aaj* about the leak of chlorine from a factory which had caused a stampede in the Aishbagh area due to its foul smell. Hundreds were reported injured.

On 17 September 1982, after nine months of painstaking research, I published my first article titled 'Save, please save this city'. The story chronicled the incidents of gas leaks in Union Carbide and the harm caused to humans, farms and livestock in the vicinity. I also described the dismal safety arrangements in the factory as against the norms prescribed. Naively, I expected an overnight revolution against the risk to people's lives but to my surprise there was no discernible reaction in Bhopal.

Changing tack the next week, I made the 24 September headline more direct and somewhat sensational: 'Bhopal sitting atop a volcano'. This article went a step further and described the alarming situation inside the plant and the government's apparent apathy. The response was no different.

Incidentally, three days after my second article, a small quantity of MIC leaked from the Union Carbide plant. The leak was controlled within minutes, but the lingering effects forced residents of nearby shanties to flee from their homes in the wee hours of the night.

My anger and disappointment reached its pinnacle. In my third front-page article on 8 October I said, '*Na samjhoge to aakhir mit hee jaaoge*' (If you don't understand you will be wiped out), paraphrasing poet Allama Iqbal's famous lines '*na samjhoge to mit jaaoge aye hindustan walon, tumhari dastan tak na hogi jahan ki dastanon mein*' (Hey, you people of India, if you don't understand, you will be wiped out and there will be no mention of you even in history). Obviously, my emphasis this time was on the recent leak and its effects on people living nearby. Again, it seemed, nobody was paying attention.

However, I was determined to persevere. I realized my voice was too meek to be heard by the higher-ups. And it was only they who were in a position to save the situation. I wrote a letter to Arjun Singh, requesting him to order an inquiry. I went to members of the Legislative Assembly with copies of my newspaper. This did work to some extent, but did not produce the desired result. Some members from both the Opposition and the ruling party raised the matter in the Assembly, but the state government said there was no cause for alarm.

Dismissing all the apprehensions of a disaster, Tara Singh Viyogi, the then labour minister, assured the house that he had himself seen the foolproof safety arrangements in the Union Carbide plant. He described a water curtain which would automatically be created by showers installed around the gas operation area in case of a leak. It would bring down the gas immediately and neutralize it. He rejected the demand to shift the plant outside municipal limits to avoid any possible danger to human life, saying, 'It's not a piece of stone which can be shifted from one place to another just like that.'

This is where I stepped out of my role as a journalist to assume that of an activist. After all, more than 5 lakh human lives were at stake. I petitioned the Supreme Court on 15 December 1982, seeking its intervention since all other options had been exhausted. I got a postal acknowledgement but nothing more.

By now I and my failed campaign had become the butt of jokes in media circles as well as among friends who thought I had gone crazy. Feeling cheated and defeated by an insensitive system and its scant regard for human lives, I left Bhopal in disgust in 1983 to work in Indore with *Nav Bharat*.

A year later I returned to Bhopal as a freelance journalist. As soon as I got a foothold in the national media, I attempted to revive the Union Carbide campaign. I worked afresh on the story and sent it to *Ravivar*, which was then a most popular Hindi weekly, published by the Ananda Bazar Patrika group. This

was returned after some time with a regret note. (The then editor of the magazine, S.P. Singh, told me in 1985 after the tragedy that he had been shocked to learn from one of his colleagues that the article had been returned without informing him.)

Around this time *Jansatta*, a Hindi daily published by the Indian Express group, was making inroads into the market. The dynamic editor, Prabhash Joshi, gave the publication an unconventional look and content. Hence I decided to take a chance with *Jansatta*. This time I was not disappointed. Convinced by the documents and researched material I produced before him, Joshi splashed the story over almost half a page. Among the documents quoted in the story was a safety audit report of the Union Carbide team from the United States in 1982. It indicted the management of the Bhopal plant for several violations of safety rules and warned of the possibility of a major accident.

Even the publication of the story so prominently in a newspaper with such a wide circulation did not move officialdom. That happened after six months when the tragedy struck Bhopal on the night of 2 and 3 December 1984. And that too only to launch a cover-up.

Water entered the killer tank 610 containing MIC that fateful night during a routine cleaning operation of the line. The MIC leaked out from the tank and enveloped half the city's population in a vicious grip. None of the preventive systems, namely, the refrigeration system to keep the tank at a temperature of 10 degrees below normal, the flare tower which should have burnt the leaking gas and the water curtain system mentioned by the minister in the Assembly, worked. The water curtain shower at 12 metres could not reach the 33-metre-high gas scrubber from where the gas was leaking. The company had jettisoned all the preventive systems as part of cost-cutting measures.

On the face of it, the site of the disaster looked untouched. There was no evidence of mass destruction on the ground—no

ruined structures, no debris strewn around. But that night hundreds of thousands of people could be seen coughing and vomiting, making their way from the old city towards New Bhopal. Situated as it is at a slight elevation, New Bhopal hardly had any trace of the gas. But not everyone was able to make it. Hundreds perished on their way to safety. Hundreds of others, especially children and older people, died in their sleep. The rest survived, only to be further stupefied by the behaviour of the multinational which seemed interested only in making money and a government indifferent to the loss of human lives.

I was then residing in old Bhopal. Around midnight, having finished a story for the *Sunday Observer*, I went to bed. Before I fell asleep, I felt a sharp pricking in my throat. I thought I was coming down with a cold. But in a few minutes I was seized by a bout of coughing and breathlessness. I was surprised to hear loud coughing from the road outside. Looking out of the window, I saw huge crowds on the streets, convulsed by fits of coughing and scurrying for safety, their mouths covered with whatever was available.

And then I noticed a very strong, foul odour.

I moved back to the bed to find my wife coughing. I realized that there was something terribly wrong. I immediately closed the window and ran to switch on the fan in spite of the December chill. I asked my wife to sit under the fan and dialled 100 to contact the police control room. When the telephone was picked up, I could hear someone coughing and then a havaladar identified himself.

'Kya hua hai shahar mein,' (What has happened in the town?) I shouted.

'Sahab, Union Carbide ki gas ki tankee foot gayee hai. Dam ghut raha hai, sahab,' (Sir, a Union Carbide gas tank has leaked. I am suffocating.) he barely managed to splutter between bouts of coughing.

So it had actually happened, I thought. Had my Cassandra-like prediction come true? No one had listened to me and today

everyone was going to die. Me too? Oh, God!

I looked at my wife, who was speechless with fear. Like me, she too knew what the gas leak meant.

Within seconds the fear of death was overpowered by a stronger feeling: to ensure that people who still had a chance to escape did. I picked up the phone and called N.K. Singh, a friend and *Indian Express* correspondent who lived at a distance in 45 bungalows, a government colony. 'Run. The gas has leaked. My time is up but you have some. Run for your life.'

He insisted that I should try and reach his place, which was so far unaffected. But I was already resigned to my fate. I made two more calls warning my friends. My wife shook me out of this state of mind, reminding me of my parents, brother and sister who were sleeping in another room.

All four of them were in bad shape when I reached them. My mental faculties suddenly began working fast. I asked them to move out with a wet handkerchief over their noses. We had two scooters. I asked my younger brother to take our parents on his two-wheeler and move away from the Union Carbide plant, towards New Bhopal. Carrying my wife and my sister on my Lambretta scooter, I violated my own instructions and rode towards the plant, only to be greeted by warnings from the crowds, moving in the opposite direction. I turned around and rode towards Idgah Hills to my friend Rajendra Babbar's place.

My family and I survived the killer night. We still suffer from lingering health problems but are far better off than others. Bhopal hospitals even today wake up to cries of help from the gas victims every morning. People, with severely affected lungs, near loss of sight, neurological disorders, low resistance and damaged uteruses, still wait in long queues in the fading hope of getting cured. Doctors do not know how to treat them. Union Carbide, which created the MIC and must know its antidote, has so far not revealed how the patients can be treated. Left to their own devices, doctors treat this medical enigma according

to their understanding of it. On the day of the leak they prescribed eye drops and antacids for the victims. Eighteen years later they suggest antibiotics, painkillers or whatever drugs are to be promoted. Obviously, it does the patient little good. The official number of dead is nearly 15,000. The tally will not stop here. Many more are in waiting.

During the night of horror there was complete chaos. The administrative machinery had come to a standstill. People did not know what to do or where to go since there was a total system breakdown. People blindly followed one another without knowing where they were headed, hoping to save their lives.

On 12 December Arjun Singh announced that another 15 tonnes of MIC remained in the plant. The only option to dispose of the stock, he said, was to restart production in the plant and use up the deadly gas. To ensure safety in the vicinity, he asked residents to move into camps that the government proposed to set up.

The plan was named Operation Faith. But people had lost faith in government by then. Their faith had left them with nothing but the lifeless bodies of their near and dear. They were determined not to repeat the mistake. By 14 December, when Operation Faith was launched in the Union Carbide plant, the old city was completely deserted. Except for the rumble of cars belonging to national and international media persons and government vehicles there was deafening silence on the roads. Lakhs of people had fled to other cities in a striking expression of no-confidence in the government.

Successive governments over the past eighteen years have proven that only faces change, not attitudes. If Arjun Singh and his government could not protect the people sacrificed at the altar of Union Carbide's cost-cutting measures, his successor, Motilal Vora, failed to do anything worthwhile to provide relief and rehabilitation to the victims. Sunderlal Patwa of the Bharatiya Janata Party went a step further and closed the sewing

centres opened for women affected by the gas leak. And in the past eight years, Chief Minister Digvijay Singh must have repeated at least eighteen times that it would be better if the people put the tragedy behind them. This comes from a man who used to champion the cause of the victims during Patwa's term. But, then, he was in the Opposition and president of the Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee.

To divert attention from the question of the state government's responsibility for the tragedy during the early days, its public relations department launched a subtle campaign through friends in the media to highlight the issue of compensation from Union Carbide. The newspapers were more than happy to allot a lot of space to publicizing the amount each victim would get, which they said would run into several thousand dollars based on cases settled in the United States.

The campaign worked to some extent. The arrival of American lawyers, called ambulance chasers, came as a godsend to the campaigners. The lawyers promised thousands of dollars as compensation to poor victims whose lives were an everyday struggle for two square meals. With their lives in disarray, they began dreaming of living in luxury.

The state's cover-up did not stop at this. Chief Minister Arjun Singh had announced a judicial inquiry on 3 December itself, headed by a sitting judge of the high court, Justice N.K. Singh. But as the commission was about to summon crucial evidence, it was hastily wound up. It is no surprise that eighteen years after the tragedy, not a single person has been convicted for killing thousands of people and leaving another 5 lakh with after-effects of varying severity from inhaling the deadly gas.

In 1985 the Central government debarred the victims from fighting the compensation claims individually. It adopted the role of parens patriae and let off Union Carbide with a total compensation of $470 million. In accepting the out-of-court settlement, the Supreme Court quashed criminal proceedings against Union Carbide officials in 1989. Famous activist lawyer

Indira Jaisingh challenged the settlement in the court naming me as a petitioner, along with others. The apex court amended its earlier order and restored the criminal case against Union Carbide. The case still drags on in the Bhopal district court without any end in sight.

It is no less ironic that the state and Central governments, which were initially accused of neglecting public interest (in granting the licence and allowing Union Carbide to run the plant without ensuring its safety), have donned the mantle of prosecutor against Union Carbide when they should have been prosecuted as partners in crime. The successful public relations campaign, the helplessness of the victims and sheer manipulation have allowed them to go scot-free. And the victims have had to make do with $470 million. Against the promised thousands of dollars, more than 90 per cent of the victims got only Rs 25,000. A cursory look at the following figures reveals how shabbily the victims have been treated in the distribution of compensation by claims courts set up for the purpose.

The total number of claims filed was 5,66,786 at the final count. According to an estimate, nearly 95 per cent claimants were awarded the minimum amount of Rs 25,000. About 4 per cent were awarded Rs 30,000 to Rs 80,000 and only 1 per cent got Rs 1 lakh or more.

Of the 22,149 death claims filed, in only 14,677 cases was compensation granted while the rest were rejected. Thus the official figure of 'nearly 15,000' is also suspect.

Getting compensation was a Herculean task for the poor and illiterate. They were made to hire lawyers, who took heavy cuts from the compensation received. But for those with the right connections, it was not all that difficult. There is a long list of people who were not even in Bhopal on the fateful day but managed to get huge sums as compensation. This includes journalists, government officials and politicians.

Of the $470 million deposited in the Reserve Bank of India in 1989, Rs 1511.51 crore was disbursed as compensation.

Due to changing value of the dollar and interest accruing over thirteen years, Rs 1360 crore remains in the account now. Many would like to grab this money one way or the other. The state government wants to use it for the Bhopal water supply system and under other heads of health and sanitation. Certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs) want to create a trust and be part of it. But nobody wants to give the money to its rightful claimants, the gas victims for whom the compensation was actually meant. It is no secret that thousands of victims have been completely incapacitated and cannot undertake any physical labour to earn a living. In Minamata, Japan, the victims of mercury poisoning receive a lifetime pension from Chisso, the company responsible for causing the problem.

In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, people came together as one to help each another. Those in a position to help were unsparing in their efforts to help others. Traders in the *chowk*, *sarafa* and *jumerati*, infamous for their greed for money, worked overtime in hospitals and cremation grounds, spending money without count to help the needy. Hundreds of volunteers working tirelessly for endless days and nights formed a network though they had not known each other before the tragedy. And all this without any consideration of caste, creed or religion.

But this spirit of altruism lasted only a month or so. For many though not all of these selfless servers it was business as usual by January 1985. Thousands of poor victims, mostly daily wage earners, finding themselves unable to work, crowded sarafa shops to pawn their silver ornaments and other valuables to buy food and medicines. By now the traders were in no mood to lower interest rates for loans against the pawned ornaments which had been underassessed in the first place.

Quacks, doctors, lawyers and photocopy shops operating in gas-hit bastis flourished on the sufferings of the poor. It was boom time for medical shops too and many took the opportunity to dispose of their stocks of near-expiry drugs.

As if all this were not enough, the government could not get it right even when distributing relief material. Its thoughtlessness created more chaos in the gas-affected bastis near the plant. Instead of delivering milk and rations at the doorstep of the victims, the administration asked them to stand in queues, no matter if most had become incapable of such exertion. Unsocial elements colluded with officials to grab huge quantities of relief rations. If the victims resisted, bombs were hurled to scare them.

To this day the victims continue to be short-changed. They were treated shabbily by judges in claims courts and doctors in hospitals. Gas victim' became a dirty word among the elites residing in New Bhopal. They believed these people were getting too much attention and a lot of money for nothing.

The cause of the victims was finally taken up by the presence, or rather the creation, of their own organizations. These were generally headed by activists from other metropolitan areas who knew what had to be done under such circumstances. This was vital as illiterate victims simply did not know how to proceed. Dharnas, andolans and demonstrations organized by activists on every aspect of the victims' suffering became a daily affair in the town. This created considerable pressure on the government for some time. But then the desire to snatch credit from each other for whatever was happening resulted in infighting among the activists. It reached a point where everyone started accusing everyone else of being an agent of Union Carbide or of working for foreign agencies. The stories about some activists travelling abroad frequently created suspicion even among the victims, leave alone the local intellectual class. The end result was that most of those found in Bhopal fighting for the victims were not to be seen after a year or so. In 1987 a new association of victims was born: the Bhopal Gas Peedit Mahila Udyog Sangathan. It was led by a gas victim, Abdul Jabbar. The sangathan has since been fighting victims' issues, both on the streets and in the

courts of law. Another group led by Satinath Sarangi, the Bhopal Group for Information and Action, is mainly involved in keeping the issue alive in international forums.

Life in Bhopal has never been the same since 1984. Mine too was no exception. As I had written about the possible dangers in a series of articles before the incident, I became a focus of attention for the media in general and the international media in particular.

Mark Tully, the BBC's legendary reporter in India, was the first to reach me for an interview. I had never even dreamed of such a situation. I had never vied for a top slot in journalism. In fact I had never sat back and set a target to achieve in journalism.

Yesterday's nobody in media was suddenly being crowned by the media as a 'prophetic writer' and a 'man with foresight'. Television channels from the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany wanted to show their viewers how a small-town journalist could make a mark. And this small-town journalist would sit before the mirror in the wee hours of the night to see his face and detect what was so special there. Finding no answers, he would leave after a few minutes with a smile on his face.

The local media was asked why it had not written about the dangers posed by Union Carbide. Embarrassed, the journalists either confessed to having missed the story due to blind faith in Union Carbide or dismissed my premonition as a fluke.

However, they reproduced my 16 June 1984 story, published in *Jansatta*, on 4 December to boost their circulations. I chose to report on the tragedy for my favourite papers, *Jansatta* in Hindi and *Indian Express* in English. These two publications helped me report on hitherto uncovered areas, unknown facts and undiscovered documents. My stories were published on the front pages. It was becoming easier and easier for me to do such exposés as people had learned to trust me and whosoever

had any information regarding Union Carbide came to share it with me. My home and the *Indian Express* office in Bhopal, which had become my workplace though I was not employed there, thronged with visitors all through the day with queries about Union Carbide.

During this period I got an opportunity to work on an assignment basis with Granada TV of UK and French and German television teams. And then came an offer from *New York Times* to work on a special investigative series of articles to find out why it happened, who was responsible and what were the lessons to be learned from the tragedy. A special team consisting of Stuart Diamond, a journalist specializing in covering disasters like Three Mile Island and based in New York, Robert Reinhold from Texas, covering the space shuttle programme, and I were pressed into the job. The investigations carried out over nearly a month resulted in a three-part series in *New York Times*. These stories were described by the paper's editors in New York as 'Pulitzer material'. But to my shock and disbelief the first two stories were credited to Stuart Diamond and the third to Robert Reinhold. My credit line was missing. When I protested, my 'services' were appreciated in writing but they refused to acknowledge my contribution. The two reporters credited with the stories expressed their helplessness before the editor's decision. They informed me that all their arguments to credit me for my 'outstanding contribution' had been turned down. However, the *New York Times*, through its then South-East Asia bureau chief, Steve Wiesmen, indicated it was willing to compensate me financially for not crediting me for the stories. This I politely turned down. I expressed my resolve to fight against the mighty *New York Times* for justice.

But there soon came an opportunity for a compromise solution. I was awarded the prestigious B.D. Goenka Award for excellence in journalism in March 1985. *New York Times* carried a news item about it with a line in it saying that I was

part of the team that had produced the *New York Times* series and assisted the two reporters. I was requested not to press the issue further since my contribution had been acknowledged in 'some manner'. However, the controversy which was covered by some US and Indian publications marred the chances of Pulitzer for the series.

I had the first taste of plagiarism in 1984. A news agency made it a practice to pick up my stories published in *Indian Express* and *Jansatta* in part or full without any acknowledgement. But to me it was still a dream from which I would occasionally wake up thinking, 'Oh God! Thousands of families are suffering and am I enjoying my glory? What an irony of fate. Success has come to me at the cost of several thousand deaths and the suffering of thousands of families in my own town! I will never be able to cherish this moment of "glory" in my life.' But these thoughts were overtaken by praise of me in the print media or by congratulatory letters and telephone calls from every part of the world. I was overwhelmed and forgot about the dead or living victims for the time being. After all I too am human, with all human weaknesses. I knew I would have to learn to live with this paradox all my life. I would never be able to raise my head with pride and boast, 'I did this.'

While I speak about others' fault or misdeeds, I must speak about my own shortcomings. What I uncovered was the result of a journalist's effort to get to the truth and not a soothsayer's prediction. Since the path to the truth passes through mountains of lies, I sometimes got lost. I made mistakes. One of them needs mention since it has led to several inaccuracies in others' writings. I was wrongly made to believe that in 1975 the then administrator of the Bhopal Municipal Corporation, M.N. Buch, had issued a notice to shift the Union Carbide plant. I wrote about this in one of my reports before the tragedy. As soon as the tragedy took place some newspapers even attributed Buch's transfer to this notice. In fact Buch remained in Bhopal

till 1978 and had nothing to do with Union Carbide because no such notice was ever issued to the company. It was laxity on my own part that I did not cross-check the facts properly, trusting a lawyer I had known for years.

I knew that people would have high expectations of me from now on. But more Bhopals are unlikely to come my way. In truth, there should never, ever be another Bhopal. Human lives are more precious than the achievements of an individual.

Slow Death in Kashipur

SAMPAD MAHAPATRA

It was Ranjan Rath, a journalist friend in Rayagada, who first tipped me off about the death under unusual circumstances of eleven tribal people in Kashipur. It was apparently a case of food poisoning. Such incidents are not uncommon and can happen at village feasts and even posh hotel dinners.

But something about the tragedy made me sit up.

The eleven victims belonged to two villages. All of them had consumed tanku pejo, a gruel prepared from boiled mango kernel. I happen to have some first-hand knowledge of tribal food habits because I had spent two years as a field researcher on the subject. I knew that in certain tribal pockets in Orissa people depend on mango kernel during the rainy season because food and employment opportunities are in short supply then.

It was too early to jump to conclusions but my journalistic instincts told me we may have stumbled upon something bigger than merely a case of food poisoning. More so because the deaths had taken place in Kashipur and that was quite significant for a number of reasons.

Kashipur is one of the eleven blocks in the tribal dominated Rayagada district bordering Andhra Pradesh. Kashipur has 414 villages and a population of around 1.02 lakh. Of this, nearly 70,000 are scheduled tribes and another 30,000 scheduled castes. While 85 per cent live below the poverty line, 65 per cent are landless.

Before Independence, Kashipur was part of the former princely state of Kalahandi, which has been in the news since the early 1980s for its abject poverty, resulting in the sale of children and even starvation deaths. Kashipur shares the same socio-economic deprivations that characterize the poor in this district and has been a hotspot for the last twenty years.

In the mid-1980s, reports of starvation deaths and a near-absence of any administrative or welfare network in this isolated, hilly and predominantly tribal tract had shaken the nation. Rajiv Gandhi, as prime minister, visited the area and launched an ambitious Rs 54-crore Orissa Tribal Development Project. The seven-year project (later extended by two years) aimed to achieve rapid socio-economic development through innovative agricultural practices, horticulture and cash cropping backed by an effective watershed management system. That the project failed to achieve its goals is another matter.

But Kashipur is not just about poverty and want. It has one of the largest bauxite reserves in the country. In 1993 Utkal Alumina International Limited, a multinational joint-venture project of Alcan of Canada, Norsk Hydro of Norway and the Aditya Birla group, wanted to lease large tracts of Kashipur for a Rs 5000-crore bauxite mine and alumina plant project. The state government and the entire political class were more than willing to play ball. But the combined might of the company and the establishment ran into the collective will of the tribal people of Kashipur, who stood to lose everything they had—land, water and forests—once the unit came up. Events reached a flashpoint on 16 December 2000 when three anti-mining protesters died in Maikanchi village in police firing.

The bauxite-mining project is important for understanding the mutual antipathy and hostility that characterize the relationship between the people and the administration.

After the shooting incident, government officials had a ready excuse not to visit villages in Kashipur: 'their lives were in

danger'. On their part, the people had reason to believe that they were being punished for their opposition to the project. That the deaths had occurred in Kashipur, therefore, had obvious news value. Moreover, Ranjan had told me that more deaths were apprehended as the consumption of mango kernel in Kashipur was widespread.

I met the state revenue minister, B.B. Harichandan, the same night and told him all I knew about the Kashipur deaths. He was visibly disturbed and called the district collector immediately. He told me on camera (for NDTV) that the district authorities had been asked to submit a report within twenty-four hours and that he had ordered immediate relief in areas where there were reports of food scarcity: 'We will not allow anyone to starve and we are taking immediate steps.'

The hard fact that thousands of people survive on boiled mango kernel for nearly three months was something I wanted everyone to know, especially because the government's godowns were then bursting with a stock of over 65 million tonnes of food grain. I knew I had to make a first-hand inquiry.

When I reached Rayagada on 11 August 2001, I was told that a father and son had died in Pitajodi village under similar circumstances in the last forty-eight hours. I also came to know that two other members of the same family had died in the last fifteen days. I changed my travel plans and instead of heading for Bilamal, where four of the eleven deaths had taken place, decided to drive straight to Pitajodi.

It was raining when we reached Gorakhpur, 65 kilometres from Rayagada. We had to walk another 2.5 kilometres to reach Pitajodi. It took us nearly forty-five minutes to make it with our heavy baggage. We were surprised to find policemen, a doctor and a number of junior-level officials already there to prepare a report on the death of Lekhena Majhi and his son.

It was a terrible sight that met the cameraperson, Sabyasachi Panigrahi, and me. The bodies were lying next to each other in the dark and dingy one-room house. As I looked around, I

found several empty earthen pots without a trace of food. There was however a large pot with the remnants of some tanku pejo in one corner.

The boy, Arjoo, was perhaps eight and his father about thirty. Most of the twenty-seven people who eventually died in Kashipur in the mango kernel tragedy were aged between twenty and thirty. Lekhena's wife and his mother had died in the past two weeks. The only survivors in this family were Lekhena's three daughters, including an eight-month-old baby.

Once the bodies were removed to the outskirts of the village for a post-mortem, Sabyasachi and I decided to look around for more information and footage and poked around cooking spaces inside the one-room houses of Lekhena's neighbours. In each we found large pots containing tanku pejo, a sticky brown liquid with grains of maize floating on it. It emitted a foul smell. In some cases, the gruel appeared to have been cooked four to five days earlier and was still being consumed. Tanku pejo has to be consumed literally with a pinch of salt because of its pronounced sour taste.

The dried mango seeds are prised open to extract the kernel. This is dried and soaked in water for a few days. It is again dried and pounded to pulp. This powder is mixed with water and a few grains of maize and boiled to make tanku pejo. This constitutes the staple diet of the tribal people in this area during the three months of rain.

Some houses in Pitajodi had a very small stock of a local cereal known as *suan*. We also found maize and dried beans in some homes, again in very small quantities, but heaps of partially and fully processed mango kernel in every hut.

I wondered why people were still taking tanku pejo when they knew it had already killed their neighbours. Those questioned said they simply had no choice. Whatever little they had produced in their fields or on the hill slopes had been completely exhausted. Most of it was in any case badly damaged due to incessant rain and flash floods. But the government had

not included Kashipur in the list of flood-affected areas. Rice was expensive and unaffordable at Rs 10 a kilogram.

With no cash, food or employment at hand, the villagers had somehow to survive. An elderly woman blandly told us, 'You can't survive on an empty stomach. So you eat anything that is available. If it kills you, it kills you. That's all.'

Scores of people we met in Kashipur said the same thing in different words, over and over again.

I talked at length to a number of junior- and senior-level district officials to find out how they reacted to the Kashipur deaths. I was painfully surprised by their nonchalance. One of them had the gall to say that these tribal people deserved no sympathy because they were resisting a massive industrial project which could radically transform the area.

However, one key field official told me that he had reported to the government that the people had no food or employment and that unless labour-intensive work was undertaken, they would die. Some of them volunteered information suggesting that the so-called welfare schemes existed only on paper. A woman who looks after the emergency feeding of the poor and the elderly said that not only was the number of beneficiaries pitifully small but there had been no supply of food under the scheme for several months.

Paramaeswar Sethi, the doctor who conducted the post-mortem, told me on camera that the deaths were primarily because of consumption of non-food materials like mango kernel. The tribals were forced to eat such stuff because they could not afford anything better. Dr Sethi had spent nearly five years in Kashipur and knew the place and people well.

The first thing I told the district collector, B.P. Sethi, when I met him after the field trip was that mango kernel must be taken out of circulation in Kashipur immediately. If mango kernel had already claimed fifteen lives, it could no longer be considered a safe 'food'.

The collector, well known for his pro-poor disposition, had come to the district barely six months earlier. He was clearly upset by the media reports on Kashipur. He expressed grave concern over the condition of the people and said that many had fallen into the trap of moneylenders and traders and had been rendered landless. But he blamed the poor health network in the district for the deaths and gave me a picture of how bad it was.

There is just one government doctor for the entire block and the state ratio is 1:1,20,000. No doctor is willing to be posted there. Primary health centres do not have personnel and remain closed most of the time. The only hospital worth the name is in Kashipur town, the block headquarters. The district hospital in Rayagada is 80 kilometres away. The rough terrain and lack of communications make it expensive and difficult to carry the sick to the nearest health centre, which could be 12 to 15 kilometres away.

When I came back to Bhubaneswar after the first trip I was not really surprised by the manner in which the special relief commissioner, H.K. Panda, and other senior bureaucrats responded to the issue. Panda claimed mango kernels had nutritional value and was a traditional food of the tribal people. The Chief Secretary, D.P. Bagchi, later repeated the same arguments before media persons. To me the issue was not whether mango kernel is good or bad as an item of consumption. What I wanted to underline was the circumstances under which people consume it for months. I wanted the babus in Bhubaneswar to know that the tribal people eat it not because it is a delicacy but because they have neither food grain at home nor money in their pockets to buy rice from the market. In villages where grain banks were functional, people did not have to depend on mango kernel. In my report on Siriguda, a village barely 3 kilometres from the block headquarters, I had made that point loud and clear.

Sumani Jhudiani, a firebrand leader of the area, told me that no one in her village ever had to eat tanku pejo because they could take rice on loan from the village grain bank. The Siriguda example proved that none would touch mango kernel if food grain was available. It disproved the theory that the tribals love to eat mango kernel.

The state government issued an official press release claiming that the deaths were accidental because mango kernel is a traditional time-tested food in Kashipur and, in fact, has nutritive value. Those who had died were above the poverty line and there was no shortage of either food or employment and the public distribution system was functioning smoothly.

The government also claimed that the sarpanches of all panchayats in the state had been authorized to extend emergency help to any family in distress by supplying them with 10 kilograms of rice from public distribution system stocks. But during my extensive tour in the area, I found that the relevant circular had not reached a single panchayat in Kashipur. Clearly, the government resorted to half-truths, even falsehood.

One of the most controversial decisions announced by the state revenue minister was to offer rice in exchange of mango kernel. The minister was criticized and ridiculed by many for the 'farcical' announcement. But I must confess I had a role to play in this decision.

I had requested the district administration and the revenue minister to seize the entire mango kernel stock in the area and destroy it because I felt this would prevent more tanku pejo deaths. I had further suggested that the government ask people to deposit their stock of mango kernel in return for an equal amount of free rice. I am sure it would have worked. But some officials felt the exercise could lead to 'complications' with regard to maintaining records.

Soon thereafter the minister retracted his offer, but no one in Kashipur knew of it. Even to this day, every panchayat office in Kashipur has huge deposits of mango kernel but officials

are at a loss to explain why they have been unable to give any rice in exchange. A panchayat official in Tikiri told me that they had to accept the bags of mango kernel from the people since there was an official directive to the effect. But when the idea was abandoned there were no written instructions from the government to stop accepting them.

The first eleven deaths had been reported from two villages, Bilamal and Panasguda, located some 25 kilometres from each other. In Panasguda, seven people including four of a family had died after consuming tanku pejo and wild mushroom.

The government claimed that Biswanath Majhi of Panasguda who lost two of his relatives was a landlord who employed farm labour. But the truth was completely different. Biswanath told me that all he owned was an acre of degraded land and those engaged in his field were fellow villagers who were helping him out as part of the misa-bhida tradition prevalent in the area under which tribal people offer free labour to each other. There are no money transactions, no wage labourers and certainly no employers in this egalitarian system. Today's 'employer' becomes a 'labourer' the next day in this wonderful tribal innovation, which should serve as a lesson in community living. The only 'payment' the beneficiary makes is to provide food to the 'labourers' for the day. And that is what Biswanath had done. He had served mango kernel to his fellow villagers because that is all he had.

In Bilamal, the family which lost four members had sold their 3 acres two years ago to Utkal Alumina. They had spent the money on hosting customary village feasts and buying essentials. For some time now they had been living a hand-to-mouth existence. The old mother who had survived the tragedy told us that she would have to beg, borrow and steal to take care of the three orphan children that her son had left behind.

I learned first-hand how the government anti-poverty schemes in these parts run when I discovered that a number of people in Bilamal who were obviously leading a miserable life

were identified as being above the poverty line in the official records. After my first interaction with the people and the ground realities in Kashipur, I was shaken. I knew that such deaths could not be described as simple cases of food poisoning. It was not 'age-old tradition' but sheer compulsion that made people consume tanku pejo for two to three months every year.

In the time-tested tradition perfected by officialdom, the state government had ordered the district administration to take 'all possible measures' to tackle the crisis. Two thousand additional gratuitous relief cards, which ensured a free supply of 20 kilograms rice a month to the needy, were issued by orders of the state special relief commissioner. Rs 15 lakh was sanctioned for food-for-work projects in the affected villages. As many as six mobile health units were sent to the area. The civil supplies department was asked to rush in with additional food stock for emergency requirements.

But that did not make a substantial difference and within a week six more tanku pejo deaths were reported.

All this while, it was virtually NDTV-Star News versus the Government of Orissa as most newspapers, including national dailies, for reasons known only to themselves, were only carrying official denials on the subject. Bolstered by the apparent indifference of large sections of the media, the government sought to play down the deaths and charged a section of the media (read NDTV-Star News) with blowing the Kashipur tragedy out of proportion.

Star News was off-air in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack because of a stand-off between the monopoly cable network in the twin cities and the Star network. This ensured that none of my reports were seen in Bhubaneswar or Cuttack, though they could be viewed on the NDTV web site. So there was a lot of confusion as to what was being reported by me and what was being denied by the state government. To add to the confusion, a leading weekly national magazine came up with a report virtually endorsing the government's position. Nearly a fortnight after

our first report went on air, the reporter of a leading national daily visited the area and filed a story claiming that the district collector had himself admitted that starvation deaths had occurred and more such deaths were likely. (The district collector, of course, later denied that he had ever said any such thing to the reporter.)

Thereafter, it was a virtual deluge with many print and TV journalists rushing to the area to report the reality behind the mounting number of deaths.

The issue sparked a fiery debate in both Houses of Parliament, with the Opposition castigating the Central and state governments for the deaths. Some of the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) MPs were equally vocal in voicing their concern over the Kashipur deaths. Newspapers quoted the Union food minister, Shanta Kumar, as saying in the House that the public distribution system was working perfectly in Kashipur and that the state government had already undertaken a proper inquiry into the alleged starvation deaths and issued gratuitous relief cards.

The Supreme Court was then hearing a landmark public interest suit from Rajasthan on the functioning of the public distribution system. That 65 million tonnes of food grain was rotting in the Food Corporation of India godowns when millions in the country went without two square meals a day was a subject of heated debate both within and outside the Supreme Court and Parliament. The apex court took the states to task for failing to provide a food safety net to the poor.

Since the public distribution system, a welfare measure aimed at the poor, was under public scrutiny, I decided to look into that aspect while reporting from Kashipur. I felt that the administration's claims that the public distribution system in Kashipur was functioning effectively and the poor therefore had access to cheap and highly subsidized rice could not be true and even if it were, it was simply not capable of preventing starvation. I was right. The administration had little defence

when it came to the public distribution system and welfare measures like old-age pensions and emergency feeding schemes. In 1997, the government identified 24,582 families as being below the poverty line (BPL). These families get BPL ration cards that give them rice at a subsidized Rs 4.75 a kilogram. But because this list was rejected by the new government which assumed power in March 2000, the beneficiaries under this scheme was limited to 15,471 families. In other words, the list being used was the one prepared nine years ago, in 1992. Local officials as well as NGO functionaries told me that another 20,000 people were still waiting to get enlisted as BPL and take advantage of the subsidized food. BPL rice was available at Rs 2 a kilogram until 2000. But the new government had hiked the price to Rs 4.75 saying it could not afford the subsidy. It also reduced the family quota from 20 kilograms a month to 16 kilograms. To make things more difficult, the poor had to buy the entire monthly quota at one go.

People can buy foodstuff at subsidized rates through the public distribution system or regular shops only if they have wage employment. Although official records claim that over a lakh mandays were created between April and July 2001, the fact remains that there has been no employment generation since the monsoon began around mid-June. I had reason to suspect that even this figure of a lakh mandays was cooked up by the local administration because people everywhere had complained of government apathy in all fields and especially in matters of employment generation.

The free feeding of the old and infirm by the state's welfare department was hardly functional in Kashipur. Although officially there were 1950 beneficiaries under the scheme, insufficient and irregular supplies of food had rendered it non-functional.

The pressure on the state government was mounting and many raised questions as to why the chief minister, Naveen Patnaik, had so far not visited the area.

Pushed on to the back foot, Patnaik finally decided to visit Kashipur full thirty-five days after the first deaths were reported. By then, patience had clearly run out. In Tikiri panchayat Patnaik was greeted by angry tribal women who hurled mango kernels at his car.

On his return to Bhubaneswar, the chief minister vehemently denied that the deaths had anything to do with food shortage. At a packed press conference he made oblique references to 'motivated' reports by a news channel (read NDTV-Star News). He sounded bitter as he accused all those who had ferreted out the Kashipur story of acting at the behest of political parties opposed to his regime. Coming from a politician, such a response was not really surprising. But I was expecting a far more honest response from a man who had all along claimed to be a politician with a difference.

During my meetings with the chief minister I did try to impress upon him that I was not pointing fingers at this or that person or this or that government. Obviously, Patnaik's government was not directly responsible for what was happening in Kashipur. My reports never suggested such a thing. In fact what I was trying to say was that the system had failed to take care of the poor and I wanted to underline the need to take a fresh look at food security for people who have little to fall back on in case of scarcity as happened in Kashipur.

The state government used a report by 'medical experts' as a damning indictment of the 'disinformation campaign' launched by 'a section of the media'. The team of experts appointed by the state government to investigate the causes of the 'controversial' deaths came up with 'scientific conclusions' after lab tests on the viscera of two of the twenty-one people who had died by then.

The expert report said, 'The possible agents present in these cases might be due to a potentially lethal food mediated by pre-formed toxin generated by infection of the food items such as mango kernel and ragi inadequately preserved and / or

processed, thus leading to infections capable of producing toxins. Since preformed bacterial toxins (such as toxins generated by *Staphylococcus* and *Bacillus Cereus*) lead to mild or moderate illness with low mortality, the findings of high case fatality among the victims under review indicate possibility of other food toxins, possibly mycotoxins.

'Since the microbiological analysis of the food remnants directly responsible for the illness could not be possible [*sic*], micro-biological analysis of food items collected from the victims' family as well as from neighbouring families has been carried out and revealed the contamination of mango-kernels in those areas with fungus like Aspergillus and Fusarium capable of producing toxins, which might have been responsible for the genesis of the illness in the victims under review.'

A few lines from the experts' report were found erased by use of whitener from the copy that was distributed to the media. There was no satisfactory answer as to why those lines were censored. That the medical experts were state government employees might not have influenced the nature and quality of the report. But that the viscera of only two out of the twenty-one victims were studied left room for doubt.

In an apparent damage-control exercise, Shanta Kumar decided to fly to Kashipur along with Naveen Patnaik barely a week after the latter's visit. The district administration and some state ministers worked overtime to flood the villages to be visited by the VVIPs with food grain, clothes and utensils. Food-for-work programmes were begun in all villages located along the VVIP route. Old political demands were fulfilled overnight by a magic wand, as it were.

After a two-hour 'conducted' tour of the area, the Union minister not only denied reports of starvation deaths but went on to say that a section of the media had tarnished the image of the country. He then launched the high-sounding Antodaya Anna Yojana in Orissa under which the 'poorest of the poor'

across the state would get 25 kilograms of rice at a subsidized price of Rs 3 a kilogram.

While talking to the media, Shanta Kumar claimed that he had himself discovered last season's maize stocked inside Biswanath Majhi's house in Panasguda and that this evidence alone convinced him that the media was presenting a misleading picture of the Kashipur deaths. Most of the media persons present there were of course left wondering how last year's maize had found its way into Biswanath's house.

Days after Shanta Kumar's visit, five similar deaths were reported from Saplaguda village in neighbouring Gajapati district, some 180 kilometres away. An embarrassed state government took some time to deny reports that these deaths were due to starvation. The official explanation was repeated: it was a case of food poisoning. The media was even tipped off about a 'sinister design by a member of a minority community' who had poisoned the food.

In December 2000, I had filed a report on a starvation death in the Bongomunda Block in Bolangir district. Premsila Bhoi, a thirty-year-old tribal widow, died after struggling with poverty and hunger for over six months. The matter generated some heat in the state Assembly and a senior government official was asked to submit a report on the alleged starvation death. He dismissed the allegations and said the reason for the woman's death was not hunger but acute anaemia! He did not, of course, feel it necessary to explain why the person suffered from acute anaemia. There was no doubt whatsoever in my mind regarding Premsila's death—it was a clear case of someone starving to death and I had said that in as many words in my report.

Interestingly, the State Relief Code has a section asking district collectors to react immediately to any press reports about alleged starvation deaths and issue 'denials' after carrying out an inquiry. The message is loud and clear: the government of the day will not concede that a person can ever die of hunger.

The old controversy about what constitutes a starvation death had resurfaced with the deaths in Kashipur and Saplaguda. So also the old arguments.

What is starvation? In my view, a continuous lack of access to proper food leads to starvation. A starving person need not have an empty stomach. A hungry man will do anything to fill it up with tubers, roots, leaves and seeds, whether edible or inedible. Any death caused by such desperate consumption, be it severe gastroenteritis or poisoning, cannot be anything other than death by starvation. But by the definition in the Famine Code, a person can be said to have died of starvation only—repeat, only—if the viscera analysis shows a total absence of food remnants. Clearly then, those trying to prove starvation deaths have a hopeless task, as I discovered in the Kashipur and Bongomunda cases.

Whatever we consume must have a minimal nutritional content. Rice, wheat, millet, jowar and maize are staple diet in this country. There are also a large number of recognized supplementary food items. However, mango kernel is certainly not an item that can qualify as food.

Even if we concede that mango kernel or tamarind seeds have been traditional foods among tribal populations in this part of Orissa, the question is why these were consumed in the first place.

The land habited by tribal communities generally offers little scope for cultivation of major food crops. Adivasis have traditionally been dependent on the forest and wildlife for survival. They practise slash and burn cultivation and supplement that by hunting and gathering a variety of forest produce that can be bartered for rice, salt, dry fish and kerosene.

Today, the tribal people have very little access to forest produce, and hunting is banned. Population pressures and new laws have rendered most of their survival techniques unsustainable. From near-nomadism, they have now become permanent settlers and are forced to make the best of whatever is available around them.

Although the general belief is that starvation deaths occur because of massive crop failures and resultant famine, the fact remains that people die of starvation even in years of bumper crops due to lack of purchasing power or access to grain stocks. In Kashipur, however, crop damage had been reported prior to the tragedy. Since most of those living in Kashipur are marginal farmers or landless labourers, even minor crop damage can have severe repercussions. And that is what had happened. The maize crop too was badly affected, thus aggravating the situation.

It is worth quoting from the 1880 Famine Commission report. Referring to starvation the report says, '. . . distress arises not so much for an actual want of food, as from loss of wages . . . in other words, money to buy food . . . [A]s a general rule, there is an abundance of food procurable, even in the worst districts at worst of times: but when men who, at the best merely live from hand to mouth, are deprived from their means of earning their wages, they starve not from the impossibility of getting food, but for necessary money to buy it.'

The nineteenth-century Famine Code formulated by the British is the basis of the Relief Code which is still in vogue in India. The Famine Code makes it virtually impossible to take official cognisance of a genuine starvation death because it stipulates that there should be no trace of any food at all in the viscera of the victim. Those who own land also can never die of starvation as far as the code is concerned. The spirit of this code lives on in the minds of the twenty-first-century bureaucrats as evident from the denials issued by the state government following press reports of the Kashipur deaths.

The term 'starvation death' has political overtones and stirs up intense political debates with the ruling and opposition parties playing their predictable roles to perfection. As far as politicians are concerned, starvation deaths are something that can happen only when the other political party is in power.

And for the bureaucracy, starvation deaths never happen.

The Congress was on the defensive in the 1980s when reports of child sales, mass migration and starvation in Kalahandi and Bolangir made international headlines, but lost no time in berating the present government, accusing it of being indifferent to the poor tribal people of Kashipur. It even sent a two-member inquiry team to Kashipur which predictably said that the number of dead was much more than what had been reported in the media.

It soon turned into a personal battle of sorts. I was accused of bringing disrepute to my state and demeaning its image in India and abroad. People in the bureaucracy called Star News and me 'anti-national'. Most of the critics had not visited Kashipur even once.

My greatest source of strength was the NDTV editorial team which not only stood by my reports but encouraged me to delve deeper into a number of related issues. The news channel reposed great faith in me, my abilities and reports from the very start. The trust compelled me to be extremely careful about all I said or showed in my reports.

One surprise for me during this period of stress was a mail from Prannoy Roy, someone we all look up to in NDTV. He advised me to spend a day with a family in distress to get a better understanding of how they survive amidst such abject poverty. He even listed all I needed to remember while staying with the family. This communication was a measure of Prannoy Roy's personal involvement in the Kashipur inquiry. Many colleagues in Delhi and the bureau contributed greatly to the debate on hunger and food insecurity by looking into aspects I had not touched on in my reports. The 'campaign', as many would describe it, had opened up the system inside out and there was a chorus of protest against the unacceptable truth that too many Indians eat what they do and die.

NDTV wanted reports almost on a daily basis. But Kashipur is 470 kilometres from Bhubaneswar and I was exhausted by

long hours of trekking during half a dozen trips to the area. What with also having to edit, script and uplink the stories to meet deadlines I was literally gasping for breath, with high blood pressure. But thanks to my friend and cameraperson Sabyasachi, the local journalist Ranjan and the daredevil jeep driver Rabi, who remained my constant companion all those days, I was able to muster the strength to keep going full steam and reach even the most inaccessible villages and hamlets.

The external pressures were many, with unfair criticism from the ruling party and bureaucracy. Even friends in the media appeared to dismiss the Kashipur deaths as accidental and some even questioned my integrity.

Some of them described my Kashipur reports as 'sensational' and untrue without visiting the area even once. But that is not uncommon. Journalists attract negative and often inimical reaction from fellow professionals if they stumble upon something big ahead of others. I did not receive any threat calls and nobody ever tried to create problems during my visits to Kashipur. But I was certainly surprised when people in Pitajodi told me during my second visit to the village that a very senior state government official had shouted at them for having allowed me and my team to shoot in the village. 'Throw them out if they come once again or else you will not receive any help from us,' he had told them. This in a way reflected the frustration among senior officials who had failed to convince anyone with their arguments to establish mango kernel as traditional tribal food.

Some local NGOs took an ambivalent position possibly because they shared the typical bureaucratic view that starvation occurs only when people get nothing to eat for weeks or even months. Like the district administration, they too held the absence of a proper health network in the area responsible for the deaths. I became aware of their viewpoint during interactions with some of them. Altogether, I was surprised that the usually vocal NGO leaders maintained a rather low

profile throughout the Kashipur crisis.

The much-awaited National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) report on Kashipur deaths came a year later, in August 2002. The single-member inquiry was conducted by Chaman Lal, the rapporteur for the commission, who visited Kashipur for a day, two months after the starvation deaths were reported. He talked only to one affected family in Panasguda and some villagers in Bilamal. He was accompanied by district officials. No wonder his report relied heavily on what the district administration had to say.

'I am inclined to agree with the State Government that the reported deaths were not due to starvation. This has also been supported by the findings of the medical team which has visited the affected villages and examined the post-mortem reports,' Lal said in his ten-page report. The report merely repeated what the state government had maintained all along in its series of denials. It said, 'The medical examination has confirmed the cause of death as food poisoning.'

However, Lal said that poverty in Kashipur was back-breaking, the tribal people lacked purchasing power and the public health-care facilities were not functioning satisfactorily. 'The issue of poverty of the majority of people in Kashipur who are landless and without any sustainable means of wage employment does not seem to have been appreciated by the Orissa Government while probing the matter,' he said. 'Most of the below-the-poverty-line (BPL) families have no means to procure food beyond the meagre scale of PDS, they are forced to eat a poor substitute like mango kernel. The hike in PDS price has further worsened their plight,' Lal said. At the same time Lal also argued that eating mango kernels was not the issue because the kernels were eaten by 'almost every family in this area'.

About the health-care system, he said that the 'enfeebled bodies' of the poor were vulnerable to diseases and ailments. 'Their poor resistance to attacks of diseases such as tuberculosis,

diarrhoea, jaundice, etc., combined with an inefficient public health care system is responsible for a high mortality rate in this area,' he said.

Lal admits to widespread prevalence of extreme poverty, malnourishment and, most importantly, lack of purchasing power among people in Kashipur. He also says that people have been 'forced' to eat mango kernel. But such observations have little to do with his final conclusion. I often wonder why people attach so much importance to such inquiries when the modus operandi and methodology adopted in such cases are so inadequate and incomplete. Justice J.S. Verma, the then chairman of the NHRC, has been saying that starvation deaths occur across the country due to misgovernance. But when the NHRC probes a specific case, it invariably comes up with a denial. The question I have is where all these starvation deaths are taking place. The NHRC owes us an answer.

I would like to refer to an instance where detailed and sincere probing produced a different conclusion in regard to reported starvation deaths. In 1996 the Orissa High Court appointed the Baidyanath Mishra judicial commission to inquire into two cases of alleged starvation deaths. The commission cross-examined concerned officials and individuals and visited the places where deaths were reported and finally concluded that the deaths were caused not due to any illness but because of want of food. The Chief Justice of the Orissa High Court, B.L. Hansaria, had then asked the state government to pay compensation of Rs 25,000 to the families of the deceased. I am sure an NHRC probe into the same would have come up with conclusions along the lines of Chaman Lal's Kashipur report.

The virtual deluge of media reports proved to be a godsend for the people of Kashipur. The VVIPs heralded Santa Claus: superfine rice, shiny utensils and saris were distributed in villages they planned to visit. Government vehicles reached the most inaccessible of villages with grains for those who would

otherwise have joined the list of dead. Doctors emerged out of nowhere to man the hospitals, which now even had medicines. Suddenly, there was plenty of work for the people.

One of the first responses to the media reports came from private individuals, some of whom even travelled all the way to Kashipur to offer whatever help they could. One touching example was of an industrialist from Delhi who visited Kashipur to see things for himself and then spent Rs 1.5 lakh to buy the entire monthly public distribution system stock for an affected panchayat and then distributed it free to all the BPL cardholders in Tikiri panchayat. There were many such examples. The big NGOs and even the government came up with a string of promises and announcements. Ten thousand gratuitous relief cards were distributed. Nearly Rs 3 crore was earmarked to be spent in labour-intensive programmes and the creation of community infrastructure. In 2001, the total number of mandays created in Kashipur block under the employment generation schemes was a little over a lakh. The figure for 2002 exceeded 7 lakh mandays.

The sad part, however, is that this manna from heaven barely lasted a few weeks. The 9/11 attack on America dwarfed all other news and Kashipur went out of focus as suddenly as it had come into it. With the media gaze turned away, it was again business as usual for the administration. Having had their five minutes of attention, the people of Kashipur too resigned themselves to their miserable lives. Perhaps they now know that the ever flirtatious media simply does not have the time to return to them and may be chasing something or someone else for a change.

Recalling Nellie to Stop More Nellies

SANJOY HAZARIKA

Jagannath Sharma was perhaps among the few mediapersons to witness the beginnings of the Nellie massacre. And at the time, Sharma, cheerful, eccentric, outspoken and balding, did not even realize what he was seeing. In the process, the man who prided himself on being where the news and the action was probably missed one of the most important news stories of his life. A veteran cameraman with ABC news, the US network, Sharma was being driven through the sleepy village of Nellie, in the heart of Assam's countryside, when he saw what he recalls as a 'commotion'. People armed with spears, bows and arrows and daos, or machetes, were rushing through the town and running into the nearby paddy fields. At that time—it was February, 1983—the weather was crisp and the ground was dry, hard and untilled, in complete contrast to the green vibrancy and muddy fields of the long, wet summer which produces the rice, vegetables and even fish and freshwater prawns that feed the neighbouring towns and provide sustenance to the farmers and their families.

The killings began around 7.00 a.m. on 18 February. They continued for nearly six hours, when the first posse of security men arrived, alerted by exhausted survivors who had run all the way to the Air Force camp some 5 or 6 kilometres from Nellie to pass on word of the slaughter.

A social worker from a neighbouring village told me when I went there later that the final toll was 1753 dead.

Nellie was one of many flashpoints in the Brahmaputra Valley during that troubled and tragic spring in Assam. It gained media coverage because it happened to be not far from Guwahati, the state's biggest city and its political, cultural and media nerve centre, and thus accessible to journalists, politicians, security officials, scholars, relief workers and do-gooders. But there were others, which just kept exploding one after the other, each with a fascinating local name: Sawolkhowa Sapori (the island where rice is eaten), Silapathar (the field of stones), Chaygaon (six villages), Gohpur and Goreswar to name just five. In each, the casualties were more than 200.

At Gohpur, we saw villages razed—not a hut or pot or fish pond was left intact. And we learned that after the attacks and counter-attacks, not less than 20,000 villagers had fled or been driven some 90 kilometres to the border with Arunachal Pradesh, where they took shelter in inhuman conditions.

But how did such madness sweep the land? Who was fighting whom and why? Indeed, at one point of time, it appeared that all ethnic and religious groups in Assam were battling each other; in places, groups inimical to each other overcame their differences to rout a common enemy. In other places, they fell on each other with primitive weapons in a fight to the end. Every conceivable grievance, every possible motive, every slight or insult, imagined and real, was converted into a tool of hate, honed into deadly sharpness and precision by planning and ruthlessness.

It was a time for vengeance, for settling old scores. Indeed, for settling all scores.

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Even to me there appears a disconnection between some memories of the Nellie massacre and the magnitude of the tragedy. One of the most clearly etched in my mind is the experience following Indira Gandhi's visit, a couple of days

after news of the killings was flashed across the world.

I remember it was sunny and dry the day Mrs Gandhi arrived by helicopter from Guwahati. There was a lot of security and a large posse of journalists chafing at the bit, dying to toss inconvenient questions at her. The police herded the journalists behind a rope, held in place at waist level by a few men in uniform.

I saw this happening from the corner of my eye and decided to move before falling into the trap. A few fast steps and I found myself face to face with Mrs Gandhi, who was visibly upset by the scale of the disaster. The Assam Governor's advisers accompanying her, who were as responsible for the mayhem that had been wreaked on Assam as anyone else, were alarmed at my having got through the net. I was beginning to enjoy myself, looking at their faces.

'OK,' I said to myself, 'You bastards, time you got your just deserts.'

And so I spoke to Mrs Gandhi one-to-one for about five minutes. The questions were simple but direct: What were her reactions to the massacre? Did she take moral responsibility for the tragedy? And how many people, according to her, had died in the event?

She was outraged and deeply grieved by the tragedy, she said. It was the students and other agitators who had built up a climate of hatred and violence, which was responsible for the incident. The death toll was exaggerated, she said. She thought—I cannot find my notebook of that time—that about 200 had died. 'But, Prime Minister,' I said, 'I have personally counted not less than 200 bodies in just one paddy field.'

'I don't know about that,' she said, and moved towards the white bulletproof Ambassador (with Delhi number plates) which had been flown in to take her around Nellie and neighbouring areas. That was the end of the interview. She drove away and I walked towards the waiting journalists, chatting briefly with them and listening to a chorus of 'How did you

manage that?' and 'What did she say?' Feeling very self-important, I turned to get to my car only to bump into someone in uniform. I found myself staring at the largest and most intimidating Sikh I had seen in my life. My first response was 'What is a Sikh and that too in an Assam police uniform doing in a place like this?' I wanted to pass but he gave me a push that was more like a shove. 'You can't behave like this. You can't push me around—don't you know we're journalists,' I snapped in exasperation. 'Who are you, anyway?'

Noting the name tag, K.P.S. Gill, I wrote it down. But the man just stood there, arms folded. '*Naam likha. Ab kya karoge?*' he asked. That stumped me. Quite so, for after writing the name, what could I do? I was not planning to complain to any senior officer because the senior-most officer in the Assam police happened to be my uncle and I certainly was not going to try and use that connection.

Anyway, the main focus of the story, Mrs Gandhi, was getting away. Gill was taken aside by a few senior officers whom I knew, like Mr Subramanium, who, I later learned, went on to help start the National Security Guard, the crack commando group which was to provide the inner security ring for the prime minister. We dashed to our cars, press and non-press, in pursuit of our quarry.

Mrs Gandhi's cavalcade drove along the narrow national highway at breakneck speed, turned off the track and, enveloped in a cloud of dust, entered a village which had been burned to the ground. There were no inhabitants left. Only burned huts and bone-dry paddy fields. Mrs Gandhi talked briefly with Gill and others, asking the name of the place and about the incident before returning to the helipad and flying to Guwahati on her way to Delhi.

Her bulletproof car, filled with relaxed security guards, overtook us en route to Guwahati as we chugged along in the Bellevue Hotel's Ambassador to file our stories that evening from the Press Trust of India (PTI) office where bureau chief

Kartik Barua, who was wonderfully connected to the world of officials and politicians, would whisper a bit of advice or offer a juicy titbit to add to the story.

There are some things, I guess, like the Mrs Gandhi interview and the Gill confrontation which were just destined to happen. These days, Gill and I respect each other's points of view (especially on migration from Bangladesh) although we do not agree on many issues.

But this was post-Nellie, or rather post-massacre Nellie. I am getting ahead of my story.

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Nellie was a tragedy just waiting to happen. The All-Assam Students Union (AASU) agitation aimed at deporting aliens from Assam had roused primordial passions. All communities felt a gut antipathy toward the miyah, the Muslim Bengali-speaking settler who had come from East Bengal, which became East Pakistan and in 1971 Bangladesh, to find work or land and, often, a wife or two.

The lands around Nellie are the traditional homeland of the Tiwas. They had a raja, and the court, or durbar, occasionally functioned. Not that these were rich kings or durbars; they survived on their income from land and its produce as well as tithes from their one-time subjects. The Lalungs, who now prefer to be known as Tiwas, had organized a brief but bloody rebellion against the British in the nineteenth century in Nogaon (then Nowgong). It was brutally quelled but the tribe was later the beneficiary of the line system, installed by the British to prevent avaricious plains-dwellers from encroaching on tribal lands. The line system no longer operates in Assam. It still exists as an inner line in Meghalaya and Mizoram, as well as in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh.

Tribal lands are nonetheless protected. Yet immigrant Muslims have been steadily encroaching on these lands,

stealthily but surely. In many cases, as in Tiwa areas, tribals sold their lands to new settlers. And the settlers' reputation for acquisitiveness had become part of the folklore of the region, thanks to a British census official.

'The immigrant army has almost completed the conquest of Nowgong. The Barpeta sub-division of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely,' declared C.S. Mullen, the Assam census commissioner in 1931. Mullen rated this influx as 'the most important event' of Assam in the past twenty-five years and described it as an 'invasion of a vast horde of land-hungry Bengali immigrants, mostly Muslims from districts of East Bengal, and in particular, Mymensingh'. This he declared would 'alter permanently the whole future of Assam and . . . destroy . . . the whole structure of Assamese culture and civilisation'.

What does the miyah want? went a folk doggerel. *Mati, roti aru beti* (land, bread and your daughter) would be the answer.

The AASU agitators and their followers used these slogans and material quite liberally. They spoke of the way the migration had over the years threatened to turn Assam into a Muslim-majority state. They talked of the need to protect the rights of Indian nationals—of the Assamese—and not to protect the immigrant vote bank, which was periodically encashed for resident status especially by the Congress party. Bitterness grew as bandh followed bandh in an effort to draw national attention and seek official intervention. The streets of every town and village in the state were filled with agitators. It was for that period of three years a people's movement.

The fact of illegal migration from Bangladesh was not disputed. The size of the influx was debatable. But across rivers and creeks, along footpaths and through paddy fields, jungles and marshes, tens of thousands of Bangladeshis slipped into eastern India, especially Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and West Bengal, every year. They risked arrest, deportation and even

getting shot. But they were determined to leave the appalling deprivation of their land for the uncertain but plausible prospect of eking out a decent living in India. Today, in a population of about 2.5 crore, Assam has probably not less than 15 lakh Bangladeshis (who have come since 1971, when Bangladesh was born). This may appear small in relation to the size of the country, but it is one-fifteenth of the population of the state.

Bangladesh is overpopulated. It leaks population. Its people are to be found everywhere, mostly illegally, in India, Pakistan and Nepal, Myanmar and Malaysia, Japan, the United States, Britain and many countries of the European Community. They are resourceful and hardworking, qualities that have held them together and played to their advantage even in times of stress, as in the North-East.

There was reason for the agitators and Assamese generally to be concerned. But reason soon turned into unreason and hatred.

During the early 1980s, the only interaction between the students and the Centre appeared to veer between confrontation—assaults on the agitators and tough laws to crack down on them—and talks with the prime minister and her home minister, Zail Singh, as well as their underlings. The dialogue finally broke down in 1983.

Mrs Gandhi decided to teach the agitators a lesson. She called an election in mid-February that year to elect a new Assembly and to fill seats to Parliament that had gone unrepresented in 1980 when the agitators forced a number of candidates to withdraw or blocked them from filing nominations.

Nellie was crackling with tension. Here and elsewhere in the Brahmaputra Valley, the call had gone out to boycott the elections and organize 'janata curfews' outside polling booths so that no one should come to vote.

Only a tiny percentage of the electorate voted. Fear and anger ruled the valley and incidents of communal, sectarian and ethnic conflict erupted all over the state.

In Nellie, the Tiwas were agitated over the seizure of their lands by the settlers, although in many cases they had been sold for a song to the immigrants. Most were not new settlers. Some had been there for over two generations, although a number were 'new'. Another trigger was provoked by rumours about the kidnapping and molestation of four Tiwa women by immigrants. A forest fire of hatred could be seen sweeping across the state.

I have learned that a group of former policemen and others took the lead in organizing the tribal retaliation. The attacks were planned with near-military precision. There were to be three fronts; the strikes would begin early in the morning and they would drive the immigrant villagers into a wedge. They attacked with daos, bows and arrows, old muskets and spears. The killings began at 7 a.m. and continued for nearly six hours. Over 1500 people were killed, mostly children, women and elderly men. Many of the younger men escaped and some ran for about 5 kilometres to an Air Force station nearby to inform them of the massacre. By the time the first group of policemen had arrived, Jagannath Sharma had filmed his story and gone—and much of the killing was over.

A day later, the dead were buried. Labour had to be brought from Guwahati, over 60 kilometres away, to handle the bodies and dig the graves. On the bank of a stream that flowed by Nellie lay a family frozen in death: infant, older siblings and parents. The youngest had been beheaded, the head lying just above the little torso.

We walked under the warm winter sun through dry paddy fields, dusty and silent, past the bodies. But we already had an idea of what to expect. The relief camp at the town had prepared us: person after person with brutal spear and dao wounds; heads bandaged; clinics overflowing with the injured and frightened survivors. There were cries of pain, helplessness and disbelief.

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'One thousand seven hundred and fifty-three,' said the bearded Muslim social worker as he walked away from the interview. He was reciting the death toll. It is a figure that I often use in my writings and in discussions. This was a month after Nellie. A new village had been built to accommodate the survivors and their families. An SOS village for orphans was also coming up. There were guards posted outside. But many could not still sleep at night. The terror was still fresh and nightmares returned regularly.

As many as 1753 died in one patch of Assam alone. In Silapathar and Gohpur, Sawolkhowa Sapori, Chaygaon and Gossaingaon not just Bengali Muslims but Assamese and other groups such as Bodos fought each other. No less than 1000 died. The final toll may never be known but was certainly not less than 3000 and could be as high as 5000.

The SOS village, I am told by a recent visitor, is doing well. But what of the killers and their associates? I do not recall any substantial inquiry or public prosecution of those involved in the Nellie slaughter. One of them told a Congress leader, 'Sir, we do not know what happened to us. An ill wind blew and we were all swept away.' For months, many of the Tiwa men lived in the hills and jungles some distance from Nellie, living off the forests and only occasionally slipping into their homes to get some sustenance.

That is now a thing of the past.

Twenty years later, can the file be opened? I do not know. But can one bury the past, especially after Gujarat and Ahmedabad and elsewhere? Where were the do-gooders and human rights activists when Assam was torn apart in 1983? Some voices were heard but, apart from Arun Shourie's campaigning journalism and his blistering series in *India Today* about how the police knew that massacres could take place in specific sensitive areas and yet failed to provide security, even the media did nothing.

There are questions which have not been answered. Not because there are no answers but because no one has the courage, in government, to answer them.

I remember a woman who I thought called out to me as I walked away from the killing fields of Nellie. This was by a path through the dry fields. She sat in the dust, under an umbrella, clad in a torn sari, with a bowl beside her. I thought she was seeking alms. As I stooped to talk to her, I saw that her neck had been slit from side to side, her vocal cords were torn and all that would come out was a moan of pain. And then I knew what she was asking for: 'Pani.'

And I had none.

I had no answers then. Although my grandparents then lived at Nogaon, 50 kilometres away, I had not even known about Nellie before reading about it on a noisy PTI ticker the night before we rushed there.

I do not even pretend to have the answers to the complex situations we have in the North-East. But there are things that the government and civil society can do to ensure that such horrors are not inflicted again, at least in the North-East. These include identity cards for all residents—a measure that the Centre is planning—small economic interventions that will improve community life, like fisheries, pressing for inland water transport (better and more boats and ghats), multiple cropping and above all the acceptance of migration as a reality. We cannot drive the settlers out—the state has neither the interest nor the will to do so. Where would we deport them? To Bangladesh? When that country refuses to accept them as its own and says these are Muslims from India?

We need to be realistic. Migration cannot stop. It can be reduced by improving conditions in Bangladesh as much as in the North-East. And by investing in innovative schemes such as work permits for groups of registered migrants which would deny them the right to settle permanently and to acquire voting rights but yet enable them to work for a year or two, repatriate

funds and then go back, to be replaced by another group. This would make monitoring simple and more effective and address some local concerns.

We cannot shy away from the larger trans-border road, rail and inland water projects and free trade and export zones, which can improve connectivity, generate employment and develop a stake on either side of the border in cooperation and common sense.

It is only a combination of civil society action and government initiative that can prevent future Nellies. The seeds of such horrors remain deeply ingrained in our societies in the North-East—witness the Naga–Kuki clashes and anti-Muslim riots in Manipur alone in the 1990s. We have to grow together within and beyond our borders to overcome them and discard the old mindsets that hold us back.

View from the Trenches

ANITA PRATAP

Big breaking stories get attached to reporters like skin. No matter what you do afterwards, you cannot slough off what people perceive to be *your* big story. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein have Watergate; Peter Arnett has the Gulf War; Michael Herr has Vietnam. Arun Shourie has his investigations into Maharashtra Chief Minister A.R. Antulay's corruption, P. Sainath his exposé on drought and S.N.M. Abdi the Bhagalpur blindings. I have Sri Lanka.

But for me, Sri Lanka is not restricted to merely reporting one big breaking event. It was there of course—was even a highpoint, as was my reporting of the devastating island-wide anti-Tamil riots of 1983. But the coverage was also a long, evolutionary process, spanning over two decades, of Sri Lanka consistently being part of my eventful career wherever I was located, whichever media organization I worked for. For more than twenty years, I have had the unique privilege of occupying a ringside seat in this beautiful nation's unfolding history, of being an eyewitness to virtually every twist and turn in its tragic developments.

It all began in 1981 and, as is normally the case, it began in a simple, undramatic, almost routine fashion. It began for me with a small news item about the burning down of the Jaffna public library. I was then based in Madras, working for *Sunday* magazine. That incident paved the way for my entry into Sri Lanka's ethnic struggle. My journalistic instincts told me this was no ordinary blaze. On probing, I realized the fire was

symbolic of an ethnic conflagration in the making. I started concentrating on this incipient conflict, reading, researching, interviewing the various protagonists, gathering the different threads of Sinhala–Tamil antagonism. When the anti-Tamil riots broke out all over Sri Lanka in 1983, widely referred to as the July holocaust, I was prepared. I was ready. I was able to plunge into the story, forearmed with knowledge.

Deep understanding of a subject anchors one well in a big breaking story. But in a crisis, intellect is no match for emotion. War reporting is invariably a journey to hell. The horrors I witnessed against the Tamils in 1983—heartbreakingly similar to the horrors that visited Muslims in Gujarat in 2002—came out not as dispassionate reports, but as shocked outpourings replete with telling, incontrovertible detail. My reports did not focus on body counts and geo-strategic niceties. Instead, they delved into the madness that lurks within human beings, the devilry that transforms innocuous, law-abiding citizens into vengeful, red-eyed mobs. They touched on how sustained hate and divisive campaigns inevitably ignite latent frustrations in men, how demagoguery licks and fuels rage, how liquor finally opens the sluice gates of savagery, and how it all snowballs into uncontrollable, self-defeating fury. My dispatches brought alive the murderous hate of the mobs, the terror of the innocent victims, the ravaged souls of parents forced to watch their children burn alive. And they focussed on the aftermath: the psychological devastation that became breeding grounds for Tamil extremism, the triumphal jingoism of the Sinhalese that precluded reconciliation, the havoc wreaked on the image of this Emerald Isle, one of the most enchanting spots on earth, and its economic ruin.

(If I have been impassioned in my writings in the aftermath of Gujarat, it is because I can see the horrifying similarity of events, situations, patterns and factors and want to do whatever I can to warn how hate campaigns and demonizing minorities can easily push India towards the road Sri Lanka tragically

hurtled down two decades ago.)

All my reports on the 1983 Sri Lankan riots were personalized. Even macro issues such as the economic disaster were reported through the tragedy of ordinary people with which my readers could easily identify. The public response to these articles was my first personal brush with the power of the media—how it can mould public opinion and influence government policy. There was outrage in Parliament when copies of *Telegraph* (*Sunday* magazine's newly launched sister publication), which carried my reports and pictures, were brandished by parliamentarians. 'India cannot remain a silent spectator when Tamils are being butchered in Sri Lanka,' agitated members of Parliament (MPs) shouted.

It was also my first personal brush with how governments use the media for their own purposes. India had already started secretly intervening in Sri Lanka by training Tamil militants in 1982. Nobody knew about it though. But India seized the July 1983 riots to intervene in Sri Lanka openly and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's special envoy to Sri Lanka, G. Parthasarathy, used my reports to give a moral mooring to India's intervention. He used them to nail Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene's claims that media reports about atrocities against the Tamils were grossly exaggerated. Jayewardene could not deny any of the incidents I reported, and my reports were the most vivid accounts of the crimes.

But Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had less luck with my reports. In 1985, while still based in Madras, I broke the news that India was arranging the first-ever secret talks between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil militants in Thimphu, Bhutan. The day my news report was front-paged in *Telegraph*, Delhi journalists confronted Rajiv Gandhi, who promptly denied it, describing it as typical media kite flying. At about the same time, Colombo journalists confronted President Jayewardene (popularly called JR), who promptly confirmed it.

The next day's newspapers were hilarious. On the front pages were juxtaposed two reports: 'PM denies secret talks' and 'JR confirms secret talks'. Rajiv Gandhi was furious. JR recounted the following conversation to me many years later. Rajiv Gandhi telephoned JR and ticked him off roundly, saying the talks were meant to be secret and one does not go about 'confirming' secret talks because they are no longer secret then. Good point, except JR was not called an 'old fox' for nothing. He retorted that not disclosing secret talks was one thing, but lying to the media was another. 'Was the honourable Prime Minister of India suggesting that the President of Sri Lanka lie to the media?' he asked in his typical urbane manner. That of course put Rajiv Gandhi on the spot and he responded by saying that JR could have been more circumspect because his confirmation ruined all the carefully laid plans. A needled JR responded tartly that it is the Indians who should be more circumspect because, don't forget, the secret plans were leaked in India.

And that's how for the first and only time in my life I came under government scrutiny. Real, hard scrutiny.

I have faced my share of threats—the fan clubs of MGR, the Tamil actor-turned-chief-minister, M.G. Ramachandran, threatened to throw acid on my face after I broke what came to be known as the MGR liquor corruption scandal. I had to live under police protection several times. For instance, Delhi police gave me protection after Shiv Sena threats following a controversial interview with Bal Thackeray in *Time* magazine during the 1993 Mumbai riots. As an investigative journalist, I have periodically exposed wrongdoing by ruling politicians and officials and caused them considerable embarrassment and headache. But not once in my entire journalistic career have I been intimidated, pressured or threatened by government agencies. I was never victimized through whispering campaigns, nor faced harassment of any sort. At innumerable international conferences, I have cited my personal experience all through

the 1980s and 1990s as proof of Indian democracy's greatness, resilience and tolerance of healthy criticism.

But the government response to the 1985 Thimphu story was an exception. I was subjected to pressure and intimidation. The external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), was very upset with the leak because this was its secret operation and very few knew about it. It became a matter of state security to plug this leak immediately. RAW knew I had access to the Tamil militants but it also knew the leak could not have come from them because the militants had not been told *where* the talks would be held. Only RAW knew that. So the leak had to be internal.

Mr Swami, then a senior Delhi-based officer of RAW, contacted my father-in-law, who was his colleague and friend, and urged him to persuade me to reveal who leaked the story. My father-in-law (then Tamil Nadu's director-general of police) refused, explaining that I was stubborn and hypersensitive to interference and that we had an unwritten code that, for the sake of family harmony, we would never discuss our work because it often ran contrary to the other's interest.

Mr Swami then called me. The conversation was genteel. I politely refused and he said normally he would not even dream of urging me to disclose my source, but this time it was a matter of national security. The man *had* to be found because the one who knew this secret would know many official secrets and if he were leaking, it would seriously jeopardize the nation. Needless to say, I was in a dilemma. But then, in the final analysis, intelligence sleuths, journalists, politicians, judges, all must work despite each other, not because of each other. I declined to disclose, hoping he would understand.

I never heard from him again, but I started getting anonymous calls, demanding to know who my source was. I refused repeatedly, citing journalistic ethics. I had actually heard about the planned secret talks from two sources. When I heard it from the first source, I started doing a bit of checking and

when I confirmed it from my second source, I went ahead and ran the story. But my lips were sealed.

Then the anonymous calls started getting nasty. They became open threats. The anonymous caller—who obviously had been tailing me and my four-year-old son—recounted our schedules and said it was very easy to kidnap my little son. He said he knew how attached I was to him. The mysterious caller had deliberately touched a soft spot. I panicked. That was one price I was not willing to pay for any story in the world. But I was not ready to give in yet. So I quickly took counter measures. I spoke to the school principal and class teacher and got assurances from them that they would keep Zubin with them till I personally collected him at 12 noon every day.

Then the caller said he would ensure I lost my job. 'All your arrogance is because you think you have a good job. Let's see how far you go when you are kicked out.' I did not mind losing my job, but I was afraid of being forced to leave under a cloud. My reputation meant everything to me and I had read nasty stories about the lengths to which dirty tricks departments went to achieve their ends. It was a Sunday when I got the call and I was very agitated. I felt I had to forewarn my editor lest these spooks cook up some damaging stories about me. I called M.J. Akbar, editor of *Sunday* magazine, in Calcutta and I was most relieved when he laughed at my fears. 'You've got these RAW types working on a Sunday. Good for you. That's the kind of reporter I like.'

After a while the anonymous calls petered off. And then RAW found the 'leak'. He was their Madras representative, a very pleasant man with two growing children. He was arrested and put away in Tihar jail. He was not the guy who told me, but clearly it was he who had told both my sources as they knew him well.

In a true democracy, the media and the government have an adversarial relationship. So it is perfectly understandable when governments do not go out of their way to help. More

often, they go out of their way to prevent you from going into areas where they know you will ferret out damaging facts. That too is understandable. It is part of the game. You cannot expect help from people you have to confront. I have been prevented and thwarted many times from going into forbidden areas, forcing me sometimes to disguise myself and undertake extreme risks. But nothing prepared me for the government deviousness I once experienced. I was actually *misled*.

There was no love lost between the Indian high commissioner in Colombo, J.N. Dixit, and me. I had exposed too many of the Rajiv Gandhi government's shenanigans. After the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord went fatally wrong, I was the only journalist who had managed to sneak into the forbidden zone around Jaffna and reported on the repression and atrocities committed by Indian soldiers and the acute deprivation and suffering of the Tamil civilians. These reports displeased the Government of India as they disproved the rosy-cosy picture painted by the officials.

So when I met Dixit in his spacious sea-facing office in Colombo in the summer of 1988, I was quite surprised by his courtesy and friendliness. After the interview, he asked me if I was headed north to meet Pirabhakaran. I told him I had already done a great deal of reporting from Jaffna and that I would be heading east to Batticaloa. I also mentioned this time I would like to do a story from the Indian Peace Keeping Force's (IPKF's) perspective and planned to meet Major General T.P. Singh, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) in charge of Batticaloa. Dixit volunteered to tell Singh to facilitate my coverage and provide whatever assistance I needed. I was surprised, but extremely grateful and we parted warmly.

I should have caught that wicked glint in his eye.

At the entrance to the GOC headquarters in Batticaloa, I was whisked in effortlessly. I was mighty impressed. Normally, the guard would try to activate a dead telephone to communicate to the reception in the main building and what

would follow was a maddening high-decibel conversation between two seemingly deaf people. Hours would pass before I ever gained entry. But this time, everything went like clockwork and within minutes I found myself in the office of the portly, genial Major General T.P. Singh. I took an instant liking to him. He was fun, friendly, informal, so unlike the pompous bureaucrats and officials one constantly dealt with.

Over the next hour, he conceded all my requests: I would be allowed to accompany contingents of the IPKF on their jeep and foot patrols into the village, their mine-clearing operations and even on their helicopter gun-ships. There were hurdles and problems, but Singh's whole attitude was one of removing and not raising obstacles. He even arranged boots and a combat fatigue uniform for me to wear. Never in all my life had I received such all-out help.

I told him so. He beamed, his small mischievous eyes twinkling in his smooth, round face. Then I added, 'And I really have to thank Mr Dixit for speaking to you to facilitate my trip. It is so nice of him.'

The beaming Singh replied, 'The high commissioner did not speak to me. He sent me a telex.'

'Well, the phone lines must have been down. Anyway, I really appreciate his intervention,' I replied.

Singh looked at me and then broke into the widest grin I have ever seen on an adult face, 'You wouldn't if you read his telex.'

My smile froze. 'What do you mean?' I asked thoroughly puzzled.

Singh went to a drawer, fished out the telex and handed it to me. The operative part ran as follows: 'Journalist Anita Pratap on her way to see you. Under no circumstances must you meet her.'

I was flabbergasted. 'Then, why are you meeting me?' I stuttered. My astonishment goaded his merriment.

'I am an Army officer. I don't take orders from the MEA [Ministry of External Affairs],' he said, bursting into laughter.

Mysterious and sometimes delightful are the ways of Indian bureaucracy!

One wing was deliberately choosing to defy another. This incident reinforced my belief that the personality of the drivers in the seats of power makes all the difference. The system is intrinsically good, but it is the people in the nodal positions who can deliver the goods or fail to do so. They can redefine their jobs with their spirit, will, grit, individuality and courage.

'But is defying the MEA advisable from your point of view?' I could not help asking.

'I have been following your reports regularly. You can be terrible, but you are always accurate. I like your spirit. If you want to risk being with the IPKF to do a story on us, why not? It can only do us good.'

And he was so right. That report was an eye-opener. It explained the difficult job the IPKF was doing in a hostile, dangerous terrain. It was a tribute to the spirit of the Indian soldier—bold, hardworking, tough and uncomplaining in the midst of danger and adversity.

It was a lesson the Indian Army would perfect in Kargil almost a decade later. Giving access to the media helps in getting your point of view across. It can be a 'force-multiplier', as Army officials love to say. But it took the second Gulf War to corrupt this into the dreadful 'embedded journalism', a phenomenon that severely damaged the credibility of the American and British media. Israeli journalist Uri Avnery calls this 'presstitution'—'In the Middle Ages, armies carried their prostitutes. In the Iraq war, American and British armies are accompanied by journalists.' Embeds legitimized, even glamorized mouthpiece journalism; it contributed immensely to the worldwide accusation that American and British journalists were patriotic and partisan. As long as they are embedded, reporters are neither free nor independent, and that reflects in their reporting. Embeds should strictly be short engagements, with the reporters filing the story unfettered after getting off the military

bandwagon. Otherwise, the reports will inevitably be one-sided and propagandist, as the second Gulf War coverage proved. Unfortunately, the logic of twenty-four-hour networks does not permit short engagements and filing afterwards. Reports have to be filed every hour, on the hour, till the war ends. The fallout of modern television coverage is that it has made journalism superficial, unnaturally fast-paced and entertainment-oriented, and it comes with inherent, embedded distortions.

Anyway, going back to the simple, innocent days of print war coverage in the 1980s, I asked Dixit when we met a few years later why he had misled me. He laughed gleefully and retorted, 'You're nothing but trouble. Why should I help you?' Touché!

Both Singh and Dixit are retired, but both continue to be my very special friends. I do not think they have any mutual contact though.

In any situation, it is vital for journalists to have contact with all the contending parties. In a conflict situation, it is an absolute necessity. The credibility and impact of a journalist is directly proportional to the access he or she has with all the protagonists of the conflict. Whatever be their personal ideology or sympathy, journalists must strive to gain access to and present all points of view in a situation. Usually every crisis has a victim and an aggressor. Journalists are usually on the side of the underdog; they after all should be the voice and face of the voiceless, faceless millions. This often angers vested interests and aggressors, provoking them to brand journalists as pro-this or anti-that. This is done deliberately to undermine the journalist and it has to be resisted vigorously. But at the same time, the aggressors must also be given the opportunity to express their point of view—provided they do so with decency, facts and logic. Usually, anger, injustice or resentment, real or perceived, motivates both the aggressor's and the victim's misguided behaviour. But a good journalist has to trawl out these motives if he or she is to put a situation in context.

Protagonists have to be presented to the readers and viewers without being lionized or demonized. It is for the readers and viewers to do that and they do it anyway, depending on their own predilections and prejudices.

If I have survived so long covering the often vicious, bloody and contentious Sri Lankan dispute with my reputation intact, it is because I consistently talked to all the players in the drama. At the height of the IPKF intervention for instance I was the only journalist who had equal access to the chief of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), V. Pirabhakaran, the Indian high commissioner and the Sri Lankan national security minister, Lalith Athulathmudalhi, who directed the war against the Tamils. I have never seen three men hate each other so. It was almost pathological. All three had strong personalities, big ambitions and bigger egos. It was perhaps inevitable they would clash, and clash violently. Each one of them knew that after I interviewed him, I was on my way to meet his hated rivals. Yet, each one had an independent equation with me. I had their trust and their respect. So they often told me things off the record, which would have been juicy information for their rivals. But just as I never betrayed others' confidences, I never betrayed theirs.

In a way, perhaps it helps to be a foreign correspondent. It automatically gives you distance. You are not part of that country, its culture or its fights. So, ironically, there is greater acceptance and less suspicion. Even my Indianness was not a problem in Sri Lanka during the IPKF intervention because readers soon cottoned on to the fact that I was a genuinely independent journalist for whom nationality was not a factor. I could not be accused of taking a pro-Indian stand. I take pride in the fact that even as an Indian bureau chief for CNN I was allowed to cover Pakistan. It is true that foreign correspondents can sometimes be superficial and even get the nuances all wrong. But it is equally true that sometimes foreign correspondents see a situation more clearly, sharply and without

any bias precisely because they are outsiders. That also explains why we have this ambivalent attitude to reports by foreign correspondents. On the one hand we tend to be dismissive and derisive, but on the other we often attach excessive importance to them because they often say things more pungently and accurately.

I feel my foreign correspondent status in Sri Lanka helped me immeasurably. Living in Madras, where the moderate and extremist Sri Lankan Tamils were based, gave me very good access and grasp of the complex issue. And because I was an outsider, all the warring factions trusted me more—or perhaps I should say mistrusted me less—than they would have had I been Tamil or Sinhalese. This is unfortunate, but it happens all the time. Vested interests seize a journalist's religion or nationality to undermine fearless, factual reporting. Reports by Muslim or Christian journalists during the Gujarat carnage were needlessly tarnished as being partisan.

Regarding the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis, I would say that being an Indian helped also because it created an immediate intimacy—I looked, ate and talked like them. I was not completely alien like the other white-skinned journalists, with whom most people of the subcontinent tend to put on a show—display their best, even putting on a fake accent to be better understood, if not accepted. But as an Indian, there was a familiarity and similarity that generated instant spontaneity, trust and rapport.

One person with whom I have always enjoyed good rapport is Pirabhakaran. Despite his fabled reclusiveness, I always managed to get interviews with Pirabhakaran at every significant landmark in the evolution of the Tamil struggle. This is also one of the reasons why, when it comes to my reporting career, I cannot shake off the Sri Lanka label.

What helped me achieve this special equation with one of the most dreaded and powerful guerrilla leaders of the world was good research and common sense. When old-fashioned

common sense helps you to see things in advance, people call it sixth sense. But I am inclined to demystify 'sixth sense'. If you scrutinize, if you listen carefully, if you are clear minded, you understand things well. You see the essence, the heart of the matter because you are not distracted or misguided by superficial or irrelevant details.

I first came to know about Pirabhakaran in 1982 when he and Uma Maheshwaran, his rival, had a shootout in Madras's Pondy Bazaar. The two had started out together as comrades in their armed struggle against the Sinhala state, but they soon fell apart, riven by differences over ideology, strategy and even a woman—though Pirabhakaran denies that. The rivalry turned murderous as witnessed in the streets of Madras. Both were arrested and then let off because of the intervention of Tamil Nadu politicians linked to the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle.

At that time, Pirabhakaran was a long, long way off from attaining his current 'pre-eminent status' in the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle. He was only a leader of one of five militant groups. Apart from the militants, there were also the moderate Tamil leaders who at that time commanded much greater respect and importance. Even among the militants, Pirabhakaran was the youngest and certainly not the most important—Uma Maheshwaran was.

For months I studied all five extremist groups, met their cadres and leaders very often. The LTTE stood apart. You did not have to be an Einstein to figure out that they were far superior to the other groups. The cadres were more disciplined, more reticent, more polite, better trained and certainly far more committed to their cause and leader as symbolized by the cyanide vial that hung on black threads around their necks. They were highly professional and punctual. If they said they would deliver a press release at 11.00 a.m., they would be there right on time. Yet another remarkable aspect was their excellent documentation. They had well-produced booklets, pamphlets, literature on their struggle, their activities and achievements.

They had photographs and even videos of the atrocities committed by the Sri Lankan army. Their propaganda machinery was simply superb, unmatched by any I have seen till today. Even the Bill Gates Foundation cannot compare with the LTTE information network. It is even more remarkable when you realize that LTTE's is a clandestine network stretching across the globe.

At the nerve centre of this world wide web was Pirabhakaran. But he was more like God than spider—omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent, but never visible in flesh and blood to the mortal eye. There were tonnes of glossy photographs and well-shot videos of him, but the man seemed almost mythical. He was not real because he was so elusive. Hardly anybody had seen him. Fewer had spoken to him. And no one had interviewed him. Ever.

That of course only stoked my determination to interview him. Till today I have never had to chase a person so assiduously, so consistently, so tenaciously and so long as I did Pirabhakaran. It took me four months before I could get that first interview—a first for him and a first for me.

Shortly after the 1983 riots, when I approached the head of the local LTTE office in Chennai with a request to interview Pirabhakaran, he was flabbergasted.

'Our leader does not give interviews,' he said with blank amazement.

'Well, he has to start sometime. Best is now and to me,' I replied.

He ruled it out completely and said I was wasting my time. I did not give up, approaching whatever source I could think of. Fuelling my determination was my conviction that Pirabhakaran would one day be the most important person in the Sri Lankan conflict. It was a conviction that stemmed simply from the visible superiority of the LTTE as a guerrilla organization in every way. Only a truly remarkable person could create such an organization. That he shunned publicity, so

unlike all the media-hungry politicians I was constantly besieged by, made Pirabhakaran even more alluring to me.

But surprisingly Indian officials disagreed with me. Indian politicians and officials kept telling me that Uma Maheshwaran was the man to watch. He was a clever guerrilla, a shrewd politician and one with whom a deal could eventually be struck. Pirabhakaran, on the other hand, they said, was too extreme, too uncompromising, unwise and unschooled in politics, an excellent guerrilla mastermind but limited because he did not know the ways of the world. As far as Indian officials were concerned, he would never make it because he was not a 'politician'. I felt that reason alone would guarantee his trajectory as the pre-eminent person in his homeland.

I was right, but only partly. What also ensured his salience was his astonishing foresight and ruthlessness. He physically removed all rivals from his path. I have been strong in my criticism about some of his policies and people have wondered how I dared criticize a man whose ruthlessness is legendary and intolerance to criticism and dissent blood-curdling. In fact while I was deposing before the Jain Commission in New Delhi, Justice Jain interrupted me at one point and warned me that I was putting myself in danger when I described Pirabhakaran's ruthlessness while explaining why I was convinced he had masterminded Rajiv Gandhi's murder. I reassured the judge, pointing out that I was only saying what I had already written about him in print. Till today, I have never faced any threats or intimidation from Pirabhakaran. He has consistently been warm, welcoming, truthful and respectful.

My association with Pirabhakaran spans two decades. Over the years, I have seen many changes in the man—he is fatter now, has shaved off his moustache and there are flecks of grey in his mane. He has shed his tiger-striped combat fatigues to don safari suits in public. But his commitment to his cause remains the same—strong, clear, uncompromising.

And he is the only one still on the scene. Indian and Sri Lankan prime ministers, presidents, foreign ministers, defence ministers, high commissioners, army commanders, politicians have come and gone. Many have retired, some have died and others were assassinated. But Pirabhakaran is the only protagonist who still remains at the nerve centre of the Sri Lankan conflict, still with the power to make or break peace, more omnipotent and omniscient today than when I first met him two decades ago.

Deciphering Silence in Kashmir

MUZAMIL JALEEL

Kashmir has always been a story of many truths sandwiched between layers of lies. It is a story of a relative truth with several contradictory definitions and confusing interpretations. It is a story of deliberate lies carefully projected as gospel.

Truth is the most politicized commodity in Kashmir today. Nobody wants to put it in words, and with reason too. Why will an ordinary villager pour out his heart, especially before a journalist? Why will he embroil himself in controversy to risk his life? And many a time, what the eye sees or the ear hears does not represent reality. Thus the challenge of reporting this conflict lies in the ability to decipher silence and understand the meaning behind every spoken word. If you discard the cautious, non-controversial approach and resist the temptation to be silent without worrying about ruffling the feathers of either side of the political divide, you must share the curse of Cassandra: you will tell the truth, but it will be so dark that no one will believe you.

In fact, truth is easily available in Kashmir but hardly anybody dares publish it. Over the years, the definition of breaking news has changed for Kashmiri reporters. Unlike other situations across the country, when you break news in Kashmir it does not shock anybody. The truth is there in the open and everybody knows about it but prefers the safety of silence. News is available in street gossip, in familiar talk at the barber's shop or while chatting on a pavement. It is buried in the poetry written during these troubled times, especially as plain prose is

deemed dangerous. Thus 'breaking news' only means risking printing something that is already public knowledge.

The dilemma of local reporters covering this conflict is that most of us are Kashmiri Muslims and thus part of the story. The separatists believe that we have a responsibility to take their side because we are their people, while the government wants us to prove our impartiality by supporting its claims in Kashmir. Our identity often does get in the way of fair reporting. Once you are conscious of this and try to be impersonal and distance yourself from the story, you are accused of being anti-Kashmir. Yet, if you follow your emotions and your loyalty to Kashmir, you jeopardize your own credibility. The only safe path is to take refuge in silence, confine yourself to hard news, avoid voicing an opinion and thus steer clear of controversy. But then, over time, silence too becomes partisan.

When Mirwaiz Mohammad Farooq, the head priest of the Jamia Mosque, was assassinated in his office in Nigeen on 21 May 1990, little mystery attached to the identity of the killers. Even their purpose was bared in street gossip. Thirteen years have passed, and the truth remains a secret that is well kept even by his own family. His young son, who succeeded him as the Valley's mirwaiz, or priest, prefers silence. And so do all of us. Truth is dangerous. Everybody takes refuge in ambiguity. Both the mirwaiz and the powerful separatist conglomerate the All-Parties Hurriyat Conference, founded soon after his father's assassination, publicly talk of a conspiracy and hold the Indian intelligence agencies accountable. But privately everybody acknowledges that he was killed by 'our own people'. They might not name any names, but if you stop a twelve-year-old in downtown Srinagar, he will tell you who did it without stopping to think for a moment. Nevertheless, the assassinated mirwaiz became Shaheed-e-Millat (martyr of the nation) and is buried in the Bihesht-e-Shohdayi Kashmir, the biggest martyrs' graveyard in Srinagar, alongside his assassin. And, ironically, both the mirwaiz and his assassin remain

undisputed martyrs of Kashmir's separatist movement.

The seventh of September 1995 was a lean day for Srinagar-based reporters till a rumour started making the rounds that four Western trekkers, being held hostage after their abduction from the jungles above Pahalgam, had been killed. Everybody rushed to their offices, including the BBC stringer Yousuf Jameel. On reaching the Press Enclave, accompanied by Mushtaq Ali, a young AFP photographer, Jameel was told that an unidentified, veiled woman had left a parcel for him. Just as he started opening it, the telephone rang. He set the parcel down to take the call and Mushtaq picked it up to see what was inside. As he opened the seal, a bomb went off. Jameel was lucky to escape with a minor injury, but Mushtaq died three days later. There was no mystery about the veiled woman who delivered the parcel because she had been accompanied by a surrendered militant who was immediately identified. But nobody dared to tell the truth. Those who came from outside took the easy route, toed the line of the security agencies and blamed the militants. The local reporters preferred silence as that way lay safety. Seven years after the murder, Javaid Shah, a counter-insurgent-turned-politician, claimed that he knew about the plot and accused the police of sending the parcel bomb to the BBC office. He did not break any news because everybody in the Press Enclave (now called Mushtaq Ali Enclave) had an idea about the perpetrators of this crime and its aim. Jameel had escaped death, but his voice was silenced. The BBC threw him out because it was Jameel and not the organization that was under threat.

Jameel's crime was nothing unusual. He had reported exactly what was happening, thus hurting the interests of various actors and making enemies for himself. Jameel's dispatches had become the most credible information emanating from Kashmir's confused crisis. Even people within the Valley would wait impatiently to listen to him on the BBC to know what was going on.

Why did Javaid Shah speak up now? Why are the security agencies downplaying the accusations of a man who was an important counter-insurgency operative of theirs for years? Why are no cases being registered and no investigations being ordered? The truth is not hidden, but silence is much more convenient.

Exactly twelve years after the mirwaiz's murder, a similar incident happened—this time at the martyrs' graveyard. Another senior Hurriyat leader, Abdul Gani Lone, fell to an assassin's bullets while leaving after attending the mirwaiz's 'martyrdom' anniversary. A young man armed with an AK-47 walked up to Lone, showering his body with bullets. He fell in a pool of blood along with his police bodyguard, dying instantly. This time, his son Sajjad Lone mustered the courage to blame the militants and Pakistan. However, as night fell, 'good sense' prevailed, and he shifted the blame to the then chief minister, Farooq Abdullah, accusing him of 'facilitating' the murder of his father.

Everybody knew who had killed Lone and why. But a deliberate silence engulfed the truth again when Lone's body was finally buried in the same graveyard, bestowing on him the status of a martyr. Lone's sons were keen to take his body to his ancestral village near Handwara and bury him in an ordinary graveyard. That was not to be. The Hurriyat leadership intervened.

The separatists called Lone Shaheed-e-Hurriyat (martyr of the revolution) while his party and his sons, Sajjad and Bilal, preferred to call the slain leader a 'martyr to peace'. Sajjad and Bilal, however, did nurse a grudge but never talked of it in public. Then when Kashmir prepared for its polls, they played a crucial role in generating a wave of participation by fielding four of their party's main leaders as candidates from their father's political bastion of Kupwara and Handwara, but never publicly acknowledging it. Ghulam Mohideen Sofi's decision to run as an independent candidate from Handwara had a

significant effect on the mood of the people. A close confidant of the assassinated Hurriyat leader, Sofi managed to erase the taboo related to the polls in this separatist bastion and overnight bridged the vast gulf between the elections and azadi. His first rally was attended by thousands shouting slogans in favour of separatism and vowing to vote for Sofi in the same breath. The campaign was carefully orchestrated. The Lone brothers stayed in the background, publicly distancing themselves from Sofi and other leaders who were participating in the polls. But the truth was exactly the reverse. Peoples Conference cadres were asked to participate in the poll campaign actively and the candidates were even allowed to use the blue flag of the party. The Hurriyat Conference privately spat venom at the Lone brothers but did not throw them out of the alliance. Why?

Kashmiri journalists had to call Ghulam Mohideen Sofi, Abdul Haq, Ghulam Qadir Mir and Abdul Rasheed Mirchal 'proxy' candidates even as we knew they were in no way proxies because the entire Peoples Conference cadre was behind them. But that was a safe middle path that everybody took. There was no rebellion in the Peoples Conference but we were made to believe that Sofi and others were part of a factional split.

This 'proxy' participation of an important constituent of the Hurriyat and a personal touch by the Lones worked magic, and a pro-election wave engulfed the entire Valley. But there was a larger reason for the widespread enthusiasm. The two ardent anti-poll separatist leaders, Syed Ali Shah Geelani and Yasin Malik, were in jail, restricting the Hurriyat's campaign to daily press releases. And when Kashmir went for the first phase of polls on 16 September thousands of men, women and even children lined up outside the polling booths, waiting impatiently to press the keys of the electronic voting machines that were used for the first time in Kashmir.

In Kupwara and Handwara, election day began like a celebration. In Handwara town, there were smiling faces and everybody seemed keen to vote and see his or her favourite

candidate make it to the state Assembly. Although most were in favour of Ghulam Mohideen Sofi—the man ostensibly fighting as an independent candidate after resigning from Lone's Peoples Conference—some were equally enthusiastic about his rival, the powerful National Conference minister in the Farooq Abdullah government, Choudhary Mohammad Ramzan.

A few miles away, the village of Maidan Chogul, lying on the main road leading to Handwara and Kupwara, witnessed an altogether different scene. Unlike Handwara, there were no lines of people waiting to exercise their franchise. Instead, an angry crowd welcomed every passing journalist or diplomat with anti-election slogans. The mood was tense and people complained that men from the local Army unit had come early morning, knocking at doors and beating and then herding them towards the polling booths. Some visitors refused to listen to the stories of Army coercion, calling Chogul village an island of separatist anger in an area where people had decided to give democracy a chance. Others used the Chogul protests to show that the enthusiasm in Handwara was an exception.

From a distance it all seemed true but as I dug a bit deeper, a different truth emerged. Neither the lines of voters in Handwara nor the agitated mob in Chogul represented the truth and, ironically, this was the case across the Valley during the polls. Why do you vote? I asked. An old man in Handwara spoke for a community that had been at the forefront of the separatist movement for years and now spearheaded the campaign for the new dawn of the democratic process. 'We want an immediate end to our plight. We want this cycle of death to stop. How long can we suffer the atrocities of security forces in the day and the terror of the militants during the night?' he said. 'I am voting because we have been promised that we will get rid of this day-to-day trauma. There will be negotiations with the militants as well for a settlement of this problem. Sofi Sahib is our leader and he cannot compromise on azadi [separatism],' he said. What does 'he cannot compromise on

azadi' mean, when Sofi had taken an oath to contest polls under the Indian Constitution? 'He looks at it differently. He says he will push for negotiations once he is elected and we know he will do that,' the old man said. Indeed, Sofi had been making the same point in his campaign rallies and would talk of taking forward 'Lone's political agenda of seeking a peaceful settlement of the Kashmir dispute through negotiations'. Does this signify any major change, or were Sofi and his party simply cashing in on their separatist agenda to win the election? This definitely did not represent anything more than a separatist leader joining mainstream electoral politics. It did not even generate any hope of restoration of peace in his own constituency.

The story at Chogul was no different. The morning of polling day was peaceful there, even though the Army had made several rounds asking the people to vote. The trouble began when a village elder, a local chemist, organized a protest. He spoke of Army jawans beating up his son when he refused to go to the polling booth. He projected himself as an ordinary villager who was peeved by Army coercion and decided to protest by not voting. But, as I learned, his motivation was not so straightforward. A cardholder of a separatist party, he had been asked to orchestrate a protest in his village, which had a strategic importance because of its location. Every vehicle going to Handwara and Kupwara, where the polling was going on smoothly, had to cross this village. An anti-election protest here had obvious political significance.

This does not mean that there was no coercion at all. The Army was out in neighbouring constituencies, herding people to polling booths or forcing village elders to make announcements from the mosque loudspeakers asking people to come out and vote. In Ahmisharief, a few miles away from Bandipore town, Army personnel were seen knocking at doors and asking everybody, including children, to come out and vote. When a soldier was confronted, he said that they had 'orders from above'. The authorities—both military and civil—denied

any such orders but the truth is that the troops were out to 'facilitate' the poll process. Who had given the orders and with what purpose? Why did the Army come out even though there were enough people voting of their own free will? Nobody explained. Nobody even tried to seek an explanation because the positive story of the polls remained very convenient and safe.

Bandipore was an interesting example. The contest here was between two strong counter-insurgents-turned-politicians. Javaid Shah was representing the National Conference while Usman Majeed was contesting on the ticket of Kuka Parrey's Awami League, which is essentially a party made up of surrendered militants. Ironically, the two Rashtriya Rifles (RR) units that operate in Bandipore divided their support between the candidates. The 14 RR supported Usman Majeed, while the 15 RR favoured Shah, generating a competition for a higher voter turnout between the two units in their respective areas of operation. Majeed finally won the poll.

The second phase of polling was equally confusing and the events that took place that day made it more difficult to draw a line between truth and falsehood. Volatile Srinagar city was carefully put with Budgam district, a traditionally high-vote area. Srinagar awoke to the boom of blasts and roaring guns. An encounter was in progress uptown, where the security forces had engaged a group of militants who had taken two police officers hostage after being holed up in a residential house. The violence had an immediate effect and there was negligible voting in the city. However, Budgam district registered a very high turnout. At noon, when the operation had concluded and the concrete house razed to rubble, the government claimed that the militants had taken shelter there and wanted to launch a suicide attack on the polling booths situated behind, in a college building. The operation was called a big success because the armed forces not only averted a major tragedy but killed two militants and managed to release the hostages unhurt. All

seemed well, but it raised a few basic questions. If the aim of the militants was to disrupt polling, why did they chose to target Srinagar city which is traditionally a boycott constituency and not Budgam where the poll timing had to be extended by an hour because of the rush at the booths? How did the armed forces manage to kill the holed-up militants and get the two police officers released from their clutches unhurt? What was the role of the retired deputy inspector general of police who lives in the vicinity in getting the officers released safely? Who were these two militants? Why was the body of only one militant recovered? The truth was available in street gossip, but nobody wanted to probe the matter because it was not the story of the day and there was nobody to confirm it.

Mohideen Sofi's stratagem of winning votes by hijacking a separatist agenda and mixing it with mainstream electoral politics was, in fact, introduced by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed and his Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) which had come up as a political force against the National Conference. Mufti's daughter Mehbooba played a pivotal role as a leader who sought justice for the people through the ballot box. Her slogan was that the solution to the Kashmir problem was only possible that way: '*Goli nahien, boli sai*' (not with bullet but through dialogue). She talked about a heroic reunion of 'boys who had taken to guns and are living in jungles' with their families and sought unconditional negotiations with them. She talked of involving Pakistan to seek a resolution of the future of Kashmir. She promised commissions of inquiry into cases of custodial killings and disappearances and other human rights abuses. She vowed to rehabilitate the families of slain militants and talked of a healing touch. In fact, Mehbooba stripped the Hurriyat of its agenda and managed to turn it into her party's poll manifesto. This worked. She would dress up in a green abaya, thus emerging as a daughter of Kashmir. She never stopped talking about the 'sacrifices of Kashmir's young men for the cause'. She would acknowledge Kashmir as a dispute

and even the PDP's poll manifesto openly talked of it. She successfully managed to touch a raw nerve and it paid her party dividends. Tearful villagers attended her rallies across south Kashmir, which emerged as the PDP's stronghold. The Muftis were expecting to get around ten seats in the Assembly and emerge as a strong pressure group. They aimed to consolidate their position for the next election, but the results surprised them. They not only dislodged the Abdullah family's dominance in Kashmir politics by defeating the uncle–nephew duo of Mustafa Kamal and Omar Abdullah but secured sixteen seats. Even the Congress managed five seats in Kashmir, where it had never ever been able to gain an electoral foothold.

Ironically, the Peoples Conference won only Sofi's seat, and Kupwara was the only district where the National Conference saved its face by winning four out of five constituencies. How did that happen? Where did the thousands who had attended the poll campaigns of the Peoples Conference proxies vanish? In Lolab, the assassination of the National Conference candidate and law minister, Mushtaq Ahmad Lone, did help create a sympathy wave for his nephew, who was subsequently fielded by the party. What happened in Kupwara and Karnah? Who 'managed' that one decisive voting machine in Kupwara that had no seal? Why did no one listen to the Peoples Conference proxy Ghulam Qadir Mir, who was crying hoarse that even the official observer had played foul by allowing disputed votes from the unsealed voting machine to be counted. These are the questions that no one tried to investigate. These few seats, in fact, did not matter in the larger picture and if the National Conference managed to win them, what then? The Peoples Conference had fielded its proxy candidates and their joining the fray had undoubtedly helped to add spice to an otherwise dull poll process. But was there a deliberate ploy not to allow them to sweep the polls across Kupwara? Was it in any way seen to represent the popularity of the separatists? As you dig deeper, a politically incorrect truth emerges. The voting

patterns explained the psyche of the people: they measured the distance between Srinagar and Delhi in each constituency and voted for that party and candidate whose agenda and rhetoric seemed farthest from Delhi. This is why the Mufti duo's mantra worked and Farooq Abdullah failed. This is why the National Conference won the Anantnag seat even as the entire district was gripped by the Mufti wave. The contest in Anantnag was between National Conference's Mehboob Beigh and a surrendered-militant-turned-politician Liyaqat Ali, deemed to be close to the security agencies. This is why Congress's little-known candidate defeated National Conference heavyweight and Speaker of the house, Abdul Ahad Vakil, in Sopore. It is a paradox that Abdullah's party was seen as closer to Delhi than even a national party like the Congress.

The same logic worked with the Peoples Conference proxies in Kupwara district. Sofi's success came out entirely as a local affair but, at the end of the day, his victory margin was very thin. The proxies did trigger a pro-election wave but ultimately it turned out to be counterproductive for them because they were seen as 'a section among separatists who had ditched the cause and were hobnobbing with Delhi'. The Mufti mantra worked for the PDP in Kashmir and secured Mufti's passage to chief ministership. But will it in any way help solve the problems of Kashmir? Will this new dispensation work to bring any solace to Kashmir?

It is politically incorrect to say so, but the high hopes raised by Mufti's government certainly do not seem justified. Peace is an illusion in Kashmir unless the militants and Pakistan want it and become party to it. In fact, Mufti's first compromise while forging an alliance with the Congress was to give up his demand for Pakistan's involvement in a peace process.

As Mufti talks of a 'healing touch' and grips Kashmir with fresh hopes of reconciliation, the men who hold the key to peace display an utter lack of interest. The Pakistan-based jihadi cadres of the Lashkar-e-Toiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Al-Badr

seem to have no plans to stop their activities. They consider the change of guard in Kashmir irrelevant to their violent campaign. Even apparently indigenous militant groups like the Hizbul Mujahideen do not seem supportive of Mufti's agenda and see a conspiracy against the 'movement' in his actions. The experiment of waging peace without clear support from Pakistan proved disastrous for the August 2000 ceasefire by the Hizbul Mujahideen and, later, for the unilateral Ramzan ceasefire by the Central government. On both occasions, the efforts failed because there was no clear road map for the peace process.

A day before the Ramzan ceasefire in 2000, I had a chance to spend a night with the jihadis in an idyllic village near the north Kashmir township of Bandipore. They had surprised me by their lack of interest in everything that happened around them and the never-ending urge to continue their violent campaign. Now when Mufti's agenda of a 'healing touch' brought new hope, I again travelled to the same village to look for answers. I met the boys: though all of them were new faces, there was no change in their attitudes. 'Only jihad can bring victory and thus peace to Kashmir,' Shahid Bhai, the commander of the small group, told me. They knew little about the major political change in Kashmir, and it did not engage them.

Bandipore is my home town, although I had left it and moved to Srinagar a couple of years after the trouble erupted across the Valley in 1990. The area is hilly and remote and is very close to the Line of Control (LOC). The huge Wular Lake, with dense tree cover around its shores, links it to other areas. Its location has always made this area a favoured transit point for militants, and all these years ultras had used it as a launching pad, a place from where they would send boys across the LOC for arms training and receive new recruits to depute to other parts of the Valley. Militant groups would avoid directly facing the security forces here, allowing a fragile calm to prevail. But as the traffic of militants continued unhindered, it was here

that the first signs of change in strategy would surface.

I walked to a single-storey mud house in one of the extreme corners of Chek-e-Arsallah Khan village in the last week of November 2002. A small group of 'foreign militants' had promised to talk to me there. I hoped to gauge their mood and have a glimpse into the next chapter in the sad story of the Valley.

It was noon and the sun shone bright. The harvest had just come in and the terraced fields were bare, dry and clean. In the backdrop, the snow-clad Harmukh peak stood like a sentry against a foreground of brown mountains. Autumn had stripped the trees of their foliage. My guide and I walked along the tiny path beside a little stream. Far away, a few village boys were playing cricket and every so often we could hear their shouts. We had been told to knock on the front door thrice to signal our arrival but as we reached the house, we found the door open and a bearded youth waiting for us. Perhaps they had seen us approaching from the balcony.

My first question was, as expected, about their reaction to Mufti's ascension to power in Kashmir. They seemed completely uninterested.

'Our aim is clear. If he helps to free Kashmir, then only will he succeed,' Shahid said. The four others in the room kept their lips sealed throughout our two-hour conversation. Several others had taken positions in and around the house, keeping an eye on every movement.

I recalled my earlier encounter with the jihadis in the same area when, one evening in 2000, I had accidentally crossed their path. They had taken me along and kept me with them for almost twenty hours. I was visiting my village after a long time and had spent the entire evening on the stone embankment of the Arin Nallah, a stream that had been an essential part of my childhood. Engrossed in chatting with a village friend, I had forgotten the basic rule never to venture out after dusk. I had to walk a kilometre to reach my relatives' house, where I

was to spend the night. Halfway there, I heard footsteps. It was a group of Kalashnikov-wielding men coming towards me. They called to me to stop. As I inched towards them, hands up and sick with fear, I heard a familiar voice asking me what I was doing out so late. It was one of the neighbours whom the militants had stopped on the road and demanded that he extend them hospitality for the night. Though the villager introduced me to the group, they thought it was risky to let me go. So perforce I had to spend the night with them. The next twenty hours, however, proved a great learning experience.

The militants follow one rule religiously while roaming around in rural Kashmir: they change their hideouts after dusk and do not emerge until the next evening. They always move in groups. This time there were six of them, all below thirty years of age. As we reached the house, the men only demanded hot water to wash, after which they knelt to offer prayers. Each had a pocket-sized Koran, and for the next two hours remained silent. After dinner was served, I mustered enough courage to ask a few questions. Except for one, all of them were from Pakistan. Initially reticent, they soon became articulate.

'We are very clear about the war. It is jihad for the cause of Allah and Islam,' explained one. The others called him Assad Bhai. But was that enough to drive them to participate in suicidal missions? 'We believe in life after death,' he said. 'We know we are laying down our lives for a holy cause, and martyrs go to heaven.' Quoting from the Holy Book, he said martyrdom was the real purpose of the life of a Momin (a true Muslim). 'The aim of our fight is not just to liberate Kashmir but to create a pure Islamic state, run strictly under Islamic laws,' the militant commander said. When I asked whether life in Pakistan and the system there were better, he said that what was happening there was 'un-Islamic' too. 'It [Pakistan] needs to be changed as well, and the Mujahideen are fast gaining ground there.'

As Assad spoke, others in the group passed around a Walkman. They were listening to recitations of Koranic verses.

They were not interested in what was happening in the world. They seldom listened to the news and watching television was out of the question as it is believed to be un-Islamic. 'We don't want to keep in touch with anything worldly because it tends to make you love your life and thus harms the spirit of jihad in you,' one among them explained.

It was almost twenty hours since I had met these 'warriors' by mere chance and tried to understand the force that drives them to death so easily. But as I spoke and watched them, I was only more confused. Finally, unable to stem my curiosity, I asked the question that had been haunting me from the moment I heard about a fidayeen (suicide) attack in Kashmir. Why did they want to die for the 'holy cause' and not live to fulfil their ambition? After a pause, Assad responded, 'Hundreds and thousands of Muslims die after spending their entire lives to earn two meals or other comforts of life. It is all useless. Only death for the cause gives meaning to life.'

It was now two years after that meeting with the jihadis. A lot had happened around the world since. I thought it might have changed their outlook. I felt that the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington and their implications for the world, General Musharraf's rejection of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the changes in Pakistan's policy towards the jihadis in their own country, the international ban, including by Pakistan, on groups like the Lashkar and Jaish and the recent PDP victory in Kashmir would have had an impact on the way they thought and acted. But Shahid and his group had nothing new to say. They lived in their own world, pursuing their own Cause, undeterred by anything around them. 'We believe in fighting till victory and we will carry on. When was the world with us in any way,' Shahid said. 'Now they have openly come out against us.' He was not keen to talk about Mufti's healing touch agenda but when I persisted, he said that their 'movement' had nothing to do with local changes. What about responding to Mufti's call for a ceasefire? 'This is entirely up to our amirs

[leaders]. We are foot soldiers. But there is no chance of laying down our guns unless the talks are about the future of Kashmir. We cannot and will not accept the status quo in the name of peace,' he said. How will Mufti initiate a new beginning in Kashmir when the militant guns still spit fire, I thought, as I bid goodbye and walked away. It is not possible.

However, what is possible is that Kashmir will get temporary relief because of Mufti's policies, and the militants, who were under tremendous pressure from the security forces, will get a breather, pushing Kashmir back to the anarchy of 1990. This is the only truth in Kashmir today.

Postscript

As I concluded these lines, some breaking news was coming on television. A group of fidayeens had stormed the Raghunath temple in the heart of Jammu. Five were already dead as the encounter continued. A BJP spokesman in Delhi blamed the Mufti government's 'appeasement of terrorists' for the incident and sought an immediate policy review.

Not Cricket!

PRADEEP MAGAZINE

The shrill ring of the mobile shattered my sleep that morning. Even as I answered, I wondered who the early caller could be. To my complete surprise, the person on the line said, '*Main Azhar bol raha hoon*' (This is Azhar).

I hadn't met or talked to the man ever since he was banned for life two years ago for his involvement in match-fixing. For the last one year I had tried my best to contact him as I was planning a story on him—a sort of human interest copy on the life and times of Mohammed Azharuddin or how the celebrated cricketer had coped with the shame and misery of being linked to match-fixing. I had been unsuccessful and had given up hope of ever doing the story. Then, suddenly, there was this call.

I was excited and told him how I had been chasing him and wanted to go down to Hyderabad to do a story on him. In his typical Hyderabadi accent, he said it was no problem. 'But right now I am busy getting my gym ready. Call me in fifteen days and we will meet.' He hung up after a few more pleasantries.

Wide awake by now, I wondered how life goes on, how time heals even the worst of wounds and how past misdemeanours might not mean much in the present context.

I picked up my own paper (I currently work at *Hindustan Times*) and reread the story that we had done on former West Indian cricketer and now TV commentator Michael Holding's curious comments on the confusion over who had won the toss at Jodhpur in the India–West Indies one-day match.

Holding had written that those present at the toss had told him that there were doubts as to who had actually won it. 'I was told by Ian Bishop [the TV commentator present] that he heard Carl Hooper [the West Indian captain] call tails and when it fell tails he thought the West Indies had won the toss. But to his surprise, it was announced that Rahul Dravid [India's captain] had won the toss.'

The TV footage clearly has Bishop saying that Hooper had called tails. Soon after, tails comes up on the coin and Bishop is about to make a formal announcement when told that Rahul Dravid had won the toss.

Our story and Holding's comments never linked the confusion with something being not quite above board during the toss. We did not imply any collusion either, as all the others present during the toss—Dravid, Hooper and the International Cricket Council's match referee Mike Procter—said that Bishop had heard it wrong. Yet suspicions remained.

They will. Ever since the world came to know that cricket as a sport is not as pure as driven snow and that the power of money is stronger than the power of a cricket stroke, the fan's trust and faith in the game has gone. Each match is viewed with suspicion and each wicket taken, every catch dropped, a stroke made and even a win or a loss is often seen as contrived—something done at the behest of a bookie.

Cricket has lost its innocence. What is true of our times is also true of the sport.

In 1997, when I did a story for *Pioneer* from the West Indies on a bookie with millions in search of players to fix matches, I could never have imagined that a day would come when players would be banned for life for involvement in match-fixing. Nor did I believe that the virus was more widespread than imagined. Like the rest of the world, I never thought that a game we watch and enjoy as a test of skill with a result that is uncertain till the very end might have in reality been already decided in exchange for money.

When I began my career in journalism in 1980 in Chandigarh, I was unaware that cricketing skills could be bartered for money. Or that players too would one day be accused of becoming part of a system where money is all that matters.

A few years of experience in the profession taught me that officials who control sport in India could buy and sell anything and anyone to gain power and wealth. I also realized we in the profession are no saints.

Everyone knows that a party in journalistic circles is generally a euphemism for a get-together arranged by officials to wine and dine reporters and keep them in good humour with expensive presents. I remember returning home from one such party, late one night in Chandigarh, with several gifts, one of them a shirt with 'I love my India' emblazoned on the pocket. I can still recall the self-disgust and fury with which I tried to rip away the slogan.

The only place I still considered sacrosanct in those days was the playing field—till rumours about betting and players' involvement in throwing matches became too insistent to be ignored. The sight of journalists regularly offering tips to bookies from the press box only reinforced the possibility of a player–bookie nexus.

Whether true or not, the stories about match-fixing came thick and fast and most people in the media had their own favourite tale of match-fixing and the role of bookies in deciding the result of the match. So the events of the 1997 tour and my meeting with a bookie were not as much a surprise as a culmination of the curiosity and interest that had been building up over many years.

The Indians, after a tough tour of South Africa, were to play a five-Test series in the West Indies. I was covering the tour for *Pioneer*, the paper I had joined in Delhi just a couple of months earlier, after having worked with *Indian Express* for seventeen long years.

Despite a weary draw in the first Test, I had a wonderful time in Jamaica. Of all the five Caribbean nations we visited on the tour, Jamaica was the most exciting. The Jamaicans' love of good food and music, combined with an extraordinary ability to take life as it comes, makes them exhilarating company.

The day after the Test, I reached Norman Manley airport late in the evening. My next destination: Trinidad and Tobago. The Indian cricketers were already at the airport, some chatting over a cup of coffee, others browsing through newspapers, while a few sat around with a distant look on their faces, probably thinking of what lay ahead.

While I was observing all this, I spotted a thin, short man, looking keenly in my direction. He seemed Indian. A face that reminds you of home is always welcome in a foreign land. Empathy is established even if you do not actually talk to that person. Our eyes met again and we both smiled. A few minutes later we were having tea together. Our friend was indeed from India and said he lived in Delhi.

A love of cricket had brought him all the way from India to the West Indies. To establish his credentials as a loyal cricket fan, he said he had travelled all over the globe to watch the Indians play. 'I have seen you before, not in India, but in England. I was there in 1996 and saw you in Nottingham,' he said.

He looked slightly younger than me, in his late thirties, and did not by his demeanour appear to be one of those wealthy businessmen who have the money and time to fly around the world. The man's furtive manner and nervous energy suggested a sense of vulnerability. He was clearly under pressure. Why, I could not fathom at the time.

We exchanged addresses before we parted. He would be staying at a five-star hotel, while another reporter covering the series and I had rented a two-room apartment near Queen's Park Oval, the ground where the second Test was to be held.

On the plane to Trinidad, I could not stop thinking about the man. At first appearance he had been just a friendly face in the crowd, with no strong personality trait to make him stand out. Yet I could not shake off the uneasy feeling that he was hiding something.

My mind was already full of juicy stories about bookies and their connection with the cricketing world. Had I stumbled on someone who could open the window to a world of deception and underhand dealings?

Once in Trinidad and through with my newspaper work, I picked up the phone and called the mysterious man from Delhi. We decided to meet at a nightclub.

By the end of the night, we were friends. Our man from Delhi, Anil, saw in the friendship an opportunity for increased business; I saw him as a lead into the murky world of shady deals.

By the time we parted, Anil had told me a great deal about himself. He was a businessman, a punter and a bookie-agent all rolled into one. He had been to all parts of the cricketing world. To South Africa, if I heard him correctly, six times. Why South Africa? 'It's a great place for people like me to be in. And it is always important to get all the information about match conditions first hand until you find a trustworthy man.'

The frequency of our meetings increased and one evening in Trinidad, over a drink, Anil asked me how close I was to the players. 'Very close,' I bragged. He tapped me on my forehead, brought his face very close to mine and whispered, 'Do you know players take money to change the odds!'

My heart was racing. The moment I was waiting for was finally here. 'No, I don't know that,' I muttered. He laughed nervously. His eyes darted around, as if trying to identify any potential eavesdropper. Once satisfied that no one could hear us, he continued, 'I am going to reveal something which is common knowledge in our circles. There have been many players who take money from bookies. Crores are wagered in the course of a match and if someone has paid a player who

can change the course of a match, he stands to make a lot of money.' I was listening.

Could he name some players who had done the job, I asked. He gave me a long list of names. I was shocked and did not know what to believe.

He told me about players who run themselves out, play false strokes, deliberately slow down the tempo of a match or bowl badly to manipulate the odds. 'It takes a lot of effort and a huge amount of money to buy these players,' he said.

As he rambled on, I could feel sweat break out on my forehead despite the air conditioning. Here was this man, as normal as any I had known, telling me stories that even if partially true could throw into doubt the integrity of the entire cricketing world. The idealistic world of heroic stands, breathtaking fightbacks and tragic failures which every fan carries around as part of a cherished storehouse of memories would come crashing down.

Imagine watching a one-day drama unfolding in front of you, knowing, or at least suspecting, that the result had already been decided! It would take the life out of cricket.

I sank deeper into the chair. He had not finished. Not yet. 'How well do you know these two players?' Anil asked me softly. 'Which two players?' I asked. 'Tendulkar and Azharuddin,' he said. 'Oh, those two? Very well,' I lied. I knew the two men about as well as any sports journalist needs to know a player—no more and no less.

His voice fell to a whisper. 'Look, there is a lot of money to be made in these deals. I have an offer to make,' he said. I could sense what was coming. I closed my eyes and listened. 'Since you know these players so well, why don't you help me establish contact with them? If you can do this I can give you as much as Rs 40 lakh, or if you wish I can give you a house in a locality of your choice in Delhi.'

His voice was beginning to sound unreal. Anil carried on, 'The money I give you can be put in any foreign bank of your

choice. All I am asking you to do is to get these two players to talk to me. Can you do it?'

I told him I would think about his offer seriously. He smiled indulgently and said it was not going to be easy but the money would be so much that it was 'worth giving it a try'.

Then came an offer with few risks attached. On the face of it, a simple give and take in which there was a lot of money to be made in exchange for 'expert advice'. 'Look, you know why I am here. I try to talk to people to assess what course the match is likely to take. I need to know the condition of the wicket, the weather, the likely composition of the playing XI and any other information that could have a bearing on the match. And don't worry, I am not asking you to do this for free. I will pay for it,' he said.

'How much?' I stammered in response. 'I will give you Rs 10,000 for each match but the information has to be of some value. And if I feel the information you are giving is of greater value I will even raise the money,' he said. There was a long pause before I said yes.

I did work for him for a couple of Test matches, feeding him 'expert' information about the next two Tests. I had established that this man was not fake.

I had informed my editor, Chandan Mitra, about the whole thing and we decided to run the story on the day the Test series got over. I also needed the reaction of Sachin Tendulkar, the captain of the team at that time, before the story was to be done. No, I did not have the courage to either approach Tendulkar or Azharuddin with the offer.

The story was done and it appeared as the lead story in *Pioneer*. The story in itself only described my experience with the bookie. It did not even hint that players were on the take. All I had said was that 'there are sharks around with loads of money, trying to tempt the players to sell their skills'.

Five years have passed since that story appeared. The cricketing world has turned topsy-turvy. No one took my story

seriously then. But once former India player Manoj Prabhakar said that he was offered money to fix a match, the establishment was forced to order a probe.

What was shocking was that Justice Chandrachud, who was appointed by the cricket board to find out whether match-fixing took place or not, did not even bother to find out from me who the bookie was. That the probe was going to be a sham became evident to me the day I appeared in front of him. I did a story as well, writing why nothing would come out of the probe.

But truth, at times, has a strange way of finding its way into the public domain. And so it happened in this case also. The Delhi police, on the trail of underworld dons, stumbled on to a conversation between a bookie and the South African captain Hansie Cronje. It was finally revealed to the world that Cronje was on the payroll of the bookies.

In India, a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) was ordered. The CBI said five Indian players had links with bookies. Mohammed Azharuddin and Ajay Sharma were banned for life by the Indian board. Kapil Dev, who was named by Prabhakar as the player who had offered him money to fix a match, was found innocent of these charges. In fact, Prabhakar was the one found to be in league with the bookies. Strange world this!

More stunning revelations were made. And for a while it appeared that important world players were involved in the scam at one point of time or the other. Even cricket administrators were under a cloud. After all a scam of this magnitude is not possible without the connivance of the establishment.

The International Cricket Council, which runs international cricket, has appointed an Anti-Corruption Unit to prevent players from being lured by bookies.

And the sport goes on. Cricket is watched by millions who may have their suspicions from time to time. But their faith in

the game is greater than the corruption in which players and administrators were mired. They know some were caught and that others managed to escape.

From a believer to a sceptic and now a cynic, I have gone through a whole range of responses to the world around me. The phone call from Azharuddin, whose magical batting skills I have admired the most, cheered up my spirits as much as Holding's revelations made one realize that suspicion still haunts the cricketing world.

One still needs to know the real truth about the whole issue. To hang a few and believe that the world of cricket has been purged of corruption is not enough.

Sting and Stink in the Tale

CHITRA SUBRAMANIAM

India. September 2002. An autorickshaw driver in Chennai is a national hero. He has just turned in a bag left behind by a passenger containing Rs 12 lakh to the local police. News networks praise his honesty. The incredulous autorickshaw driver is quoted as saying he was just doing his job. The money was not his and had to be returned to its rightful owner. One man's honesty touches a nation's conscience.

Sweden. April 1987. One man in Sweden was very worried. Something was wrong with the Bofors–India gun deal. The numbers were not adding up. Questions led to more questions. What should have been a simple bureaucratic procedure of stocktaking was turning into a political nightmare. When he found that he could no longer work honestly, he turned to the media as the keeper of the nation's conscience, weighing in the odds between duty to his office and duty to his country. He, too, was doing his job. This man, Sting, was my principle source in Sweden.

It was not as if Sting or Snowman, my principle source in Switzerland, woke up one morning and decided to help an Indian journalist. Nor were they planning and plotting to shake and topple governments, much less save the world. Their commitment to what was expected of them as matter of course is what makes them extraordinary, like the autorickshaw driver in Chennai. Honesty is not an aberration.

From the routine acts of people to those about which we read in newspapers, truth speaks to us every day, if we care to

listen. Some are big, others more routine, but what they all have in common is one simple fact: truth is not fussy. In fact, its simplicity is stunning and stands the test of time and questioning. It is sixteen years since the Bofors story unfolded. Other Boforses, much worse in the harm they did to the country, may have dimmed the gun deal's sensationally simple details of corruption at the highest levels, but they have taken nothing away from the simple truth.

The truth about the Bofors–India howitzer deal is straightforward. The then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, was deeply involved in the ugly cover-up because he knew to whom the bribes were paid and where. We know some of his closest friends gained personally from the deal. We will never know if he did. What we do know is that he lost an election as he sought to suppress the truth. In the final analysis, the real issue in the Bofors–India gun deal was not the Rs 64 crore that was traced or the Rs 250 crore that the Swedish arms manufacturer was required to pay to Indians and others as bribes for a gun contract. The real issue was one of faith and the betrayal of that faith by a system, a government, a prime minister. For over thirty-two months beginning 16 April 1986 when the Swedish National Radio first revealed something of the scandal, the Bofors pay-off crippled one of the most popular governments elected by the Indian people and prevented it from getting on with the business of governance. For over fifteen years, successive governments have used and abused Bofors for political mileage and personal gain.

Discussing how politicians stole money from the country's coffers places a heavy responsibility on any analysis trying to make sense of it all. Where should helplessness end and outrage begin? Time adds a bewildering perspective. In a blink this contextualizing can slip from action to apathy.

The rot is deep. Bofors and other much worse Boforses that followed have exposed a rather stable line-up of allies and

opponents on both sides of the ethical and moral divide—allies whose sense of self-preservation has tainted their view on crime, corruption and institutional damage. The basic interaction between and within these coalitions was about the levels of acceptable corruption and crime, but not about corruption itself. Once aberrations turn into core beliefs they are resistant to change. These coalitions consist of actors from a variety of institutions, both public and private, at various levels of government who share a basic set of beliefs and seek to manipulate rules to achieve their goals. The bureaucracy's remit is to provide institutional checks and balances against individual and collective threats to democracy. When it abdicates this responsibility, corruption and crime become the political glue.

Unaccounted and unpunished crimes bleed the system slowly but surely. They create space for bigger and worse crimes. Systematic attacks on our institutions have created a situation where crime is constant and where only its frequency and violence fluctuate. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that in some ways our systems now threaten our democracy. Hollow men and women cannot convict anyone for the Bofors scandal because they are all in it together. These same people attribute Gujarat and other Gujarats before it to a foreign hand. They said that about Bofors and almost every crime for which they did not wish to take responsibility. There is no external plot, no grand foreign design. We have got there all by ourselves. Nobody has let India down more than Indians.

It is no small fact that at times when the very fabric of our nation has been threatened by ugly forces, the media has kept hope alive by seeking answers, ploughing the political fields in search of accountability. In our darkest political hour, there have always been voices speaking out against injustice. Bofors was no exception.

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16 April 1987: 'Swedish National Radio said today that the armaments firm Bofors won Sweden's biggest export order by bribing senior Indian politicians and key defence figures through secret Swiss bank accounts. The radio quoted senior company sources as saying that four instalments totalling 32 million Swedish crowns [1 SEK was approximately 4 Indian rupees in 1987] were paid into secret accounts in the Swiss Bank Corporation during the last two months of 1987.'

Reuters carried that story from Stockholm as well as New Delhi's vehement denials throughout that Easter weekend. I was in Geneva as the *Hindu* correspondent when a colleague from Reuters sent me the radio stories with a message, 'trouble for Mr Clean?'. That was a sobriquet for Rajiv Gandhi who became India's prime minister in 1984 after his mother and prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was gunned down by her bodyguards.

Corruption is not new to national and international politics. In fact, Indira Gandhi had developed a sustainable relationship with it. Her son, untested in electoral politics and untainted by corruption, took over as prime minister and said he wanted to cleanse the Congress party. '[Millions of ordinary Congress workers] are handicapped, for on their backs ride brokers of power and influence . . . Corruption is not only tolerated but even regarded as the hallmark of leadership,' he said in Mumbai at a function commemorating 100 years of the Congress party. India held its breath and thanked its stars. We finally had a leader who would make us a modern and responsible state.

I have often revisited that statement in the light of what happened subsequently. Was Rajiv Gandhi naive? Cunning? Badly advised? Or, was he trying to get rid of middlemen so that he and a few trusted lieutenants might broker the deal directly? For the Bofors deal, he removed all middlemen and relied on the advice of a small group that included his cousin Arun Nehru and long-time friend Arun Singh, who was also his minister of state for defence.

We will never know why a man who came in as Mr Clean went out as Mr Cover-Up. What we do know is that once the story of bribes and corruption began to appear in the media, he did everything in his power to hide the facts and offered supercilious reasons to explain away the payments. Worse, he used and abused every democratic institution to serve his needs. Nothing was spared. Enormous damage was done to conventions and past practice. Even the Army was tarred. 'This has not occurred in any other scandal. Procedures and precedents—it's like a case log, it builds up for a period of time. It is painstaking and when it is there, it lends dignity and certainty that things will move in a certain fashion. Certain credibility is given to institutional processes. It is easy to damage them. And the damage once done, particularly if it is a grievous damage, is going to take years, decades to rebuild. And that is the optimistic point of view,' said General Krishnaswamy Sundarji, Chief of Army Staff, in an interview for my book *Bofors: The Story behind the News*. Sundarji said he had been told by Arun Singh that all this was being done to 'save the skin of one man'. The man's name was not mentioned. There was no need for that. Arun Singh resigned when the details of the Bofors scandal made it untenable for any self-respecting person to remain in the government. To this day he has never spoken publicly about Bofors.

I came into the story like most other journalists and remained with it for eleven years till the first boxes of secret Swiss bank papers were handed over to India in January 1997. 'I will go around like a bee and gather the documents and you sting,' said my principal source in Sweden. We decided together that his name would therefore be Sting. Through him I gained access to some 400 documents that blew the lid off the official Indian line that there were no bribes. Pieced together over a period of time, the Bofors documents told an ugly story of greed and corruption among people who least required all that money. Shorn of all the drama and denials, it was the story of

senior Indian and Swedish politicians and bureaucrats colluding to bribe their way to a gun deal.

The documents formed the basis of India's case in Switzerland. Details of bank transfers, diaries, hurriedly scribbled notes with names of desperate and frightened people meeting in Switzerland, Sweden, Italy and India formed part of these documents. Without Sting, the truth about the pay-offs, the sleaze and the millions in secret Swiss bank accounts would have been buried in a joint Indo-Swedish cover-up.

In the late 1970s, when Indira Gandhi was prime minister, the Indian Army began its search for a new howitzer. Bofors had already informed them about its 155-mm (barrel diameter) Field Howitzer 77 but the gun did not as yet meet India's requirements for use in mountainous regions. Various arms manufacturers approached India as is normal practice and the Army began a long and exhaustive process of weapons testing. Bofors and a few others survived the elimination rounds and the final contenders for the contract with India were the Swedish gun and the French gun manufactured by the state-owned Sofma. The French government was known for the extensive back-up it provided to arms manufacturers including provision of funds without questioning their final destination or purpose. Would social democratic Sweden, known for its sense of political correctness and commitment to social justice, provide such undying and sustainable support?

The selection process was still incomplete when Indira Gandhi died and her son took over. Both Sofma and Bofors had their champions and detractors. Bofors was a good gun and the Rajiv Gandhi government took just twenty-four hours to endorse the Army's recommendation that the contract be granted to the Swedes. The total value of the gun contract was Rs 1700 crore for 410 field howitzers, ammunition of six types, fire control equipment and technical literature. There was also a licence production contract for almost double that amount stretching over a decade at the end of which India would be

able to manufacture the guns at home. It was the biggest ever contract to come Sweden's way. It would assure jobs till the end of the twentieth century.

The Indian contract saved the company from dire financial straits. To take it home, the Swedish government had deployed all its resources including diverting export credit normally reserved for developmental projects. Contract in hand, Martin Ardbo, the then managing director of Bofors and chief architect of the bribes and cover-up plan, returned to Karlskoga (where Bofors is located) and unfurled an Indian flag. The then Swedish prime minister, Olof Palme, was 'a decisive factor' in swinging the deal for the Swedes, Ardbo said. Olof Palme had been a controversial figure at home despite being a champion of peaceful accommodation in the international arena. I learned that he attacked personal opponents with a stridency unknown abroad. During the Bofors investigation, it was not difficult to conclude that Palme the man of peace also actively supported the Swedish arms industry.

Before the Indian scandal surfaced, there had been allegations that Bofors was involved in smuggling arms to Bahrain, Dubai, Thailand and Iran via Singapore. Bofors had admitted breaking strict Swedish rules on arms sales. Martin Ardbo was telling friends privately that if he spoke, the Swedish government would fall. The entire Bofors affair, of which the Indian deal was only a part, carried profound implications for Sweden. 'Sweden's self-confidence is shaken—this wrongdoing at Bofors raises a painful moral dilemma,' Carl Johan Aberg, a foreign ministry official and Palme's trusted lieutenant in the Indian deal, admitted to journalists. What came out subsequently was that the Swedish government was fully aware of every detail of the Bofors–India case.

The Swedish Radio broadcast hit the Government of India between the eyes. It was already trying to cope with the rumblings of another arms scandal with Germany over which its finance minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, had resigned

and called for an inquiry. Official India did what it does best at times like this: it shot the messenger and denied what had not been said. This was a plot of the Central Intelligence Authority (CIA). The Pakistani intelligence unit, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), a favourite usual suspect, was not in fashion then. Very early in the story, Rajiv Gandhi declared in Parliament that neither he nor any member of his family had taken any money in the Bofors deal. The Congress party cheered what it said was a bold and honest statement while the rest of the world was left wondering why the prime minister of the world's largest democracy was denying something of which he had not been accused.

It bears mention that for several months after the scandal surfaced, there was no direct link between Rajiv Gandhi and the bribery details. But the swift, strong and disproportionate denials from his team were so loud and boisterous that many of us sensed a suspicious mismatch between allegation and denial. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the country's prime investigative agency, fell in line and took orders from the Government of India. Sweden and Bofors were eager to conform. The cover-up was scripted in Delhi and enacted in Geneva, Stockholm and London as well as in New Delhi. The official line was that the money secretly paid into Swiss bank accounts constituted 'winding-up charges' to close commission agreements following India's no-middleman, no-agent requirement, said New Delhi. So it was, said Bofors. In Sweden, Palme's successor, Ingvar Carlsson, continued to help the cover-up. The Opposition in India missed the story. In its eagerness to attack the government, it said India had bought a bad gun. That complicated my task. It was bad enough trying to investigate the money trail. Now I had to learn about guns, and this was before the days of Google!

Sweden ordered an inquiry into the Swedish Radio allegations and asked the Swedish National Audit Bureau to determine the facts. The bureau did a thorough job linking

illegal payments directly to the gun deal with India. Bofors had, at the time of the inquiry, paid 319 million Swedish crowns in connection with the Indian deal. Three clear tracks of payments were identified. One amount was paid into three secret Swiss banks accounts named Lotus (Swiss Bank Corporation), Tulip (Manufacturers Hannover Trust Company) and Mont Blanc (Credit Suisse) which together got some 80 million SEK. These payments were routed through what was called the Pitco-Moresco-Moineau track after the companies with which they were linked. Documents leaked a year later showed that this trail was linked to the Hindujas, the well-known non-resident-Indian (NRI) business house. The Hindujas denied any connection until the investigations and court cases in Switzerland firmly indicated otherwise.

Another set of illegal transfers was made to the former Bofors agent in India, Washeshar Nath 'Win' Chadha, and paid into an account called Svenska Incorporated at the Swiss Bank Corporation. These totalled 188 million SEK. When I made the links in my news stories, Chadha was allowed to flee to Dubai after which the CBI raided his premises. From Dubai he made periodic statements saying the truth would never surface. As the journalistic investigation progressed it became obvious that Bofors followed the traditional system employed by all arms companies. It had several agents. Win Chadha and his Indian company linked to Svenska, Anatronics, worked the corridors of power and handled the middle-level pay-offs necessary to shepherd the Bofors file through the Indian system. The second agent was to operate in secret at a high level. The arrangement worked until the government asked Bofors to sack its agents.

The third clutch of payments was political. It was paid into the Nordfinanz Bank in Zurich to the account of a company called AE Services. This was a single payment of 50 million SEK. The front-end mover of this company was a man called Robert Atkinson Wilson living in the UK. Hiding behind him

was Ottavio Quattrocchi, who we now know received money in an account of which he is the beneficial owner. Quattrocchi, a close friend of the Gandhi family, represented an Italian company in India and his rise to fame and fortune has been traced back directly to this connection. When that story was documented, he was allowed to flee the country and make his way to Malaysia (and later to Europe) from where he continues to deny any knowledge of the scandal, much less receiving any bribe. The CBI, however, has documents linking him with payments from Bofors.

I began receiving verbal confirmation about the pay-offs in the autumn of 1987. Searching for a journalistic mean between investigating the facts and reporting the story was a challenging task. My rule was simple. I worked on two independent sources for each story and established one hard fact in every episode. The pieces of the jigsaw were not easy to come by. Travelling frequently to Sweden in search of information and not knowing where to begin, I cast the net wide. By the end of 1987, it was clear that something was very wrong somewhere and that I was on to something big. The Swedish investigation had established beyond doubt that large illegal payments had been made to Indians and others through unorthodox channels into secret Swiss banks. The Indian position was that these were winding-up charges. However, questions remained. If indeed these were winding-up charges, why were they paid after the contract was signed? And, more importantly, why were they paid secretly into faceless accounts in Switzerland? And India did take Bofors to court. That being so, why was the contract not cancelled?

A joint parliamentary committee (JPC) was constituted to look into the growing body of allegations. But unknown to us then, Operation Cover-Up had been launched in India and Sweden and several meetings between the chief actors in this drama took place in Geneva, London, Stockholm and New Delhi. These comprised arms dealers, senior government

officials, tax consultants and an assortment of soothsayers. They told the Swedes what to tell the Indians. They told the Indians what to tell the Swedes. Arms dealers and commission agents were scripting a show to deceive the world's largest democracy. When Sten Lindstrom, Sweden's chief investigator, asked India for assistance, he ran into a stone wall. The familiar 'foreign hand' was invoked. Subsequently, pressure from India was brought to bear on Sweden to drop its investigations.

The Indian JPC was caught between the devil and the deep sea. Faced with serious allegations and a moral responsibility to the nation on one hand and the political writing on the wall that ran contrary to its remit, the JPC evoked derision. A clutch of politicians travelled all over the country to watch the Bofors gun shoot and scoot, a distinctive capability that had tilted the deal in its favour. The JPC even contemplated visiting Sweden to see how and where the guns were manufactured.

For the record, India invited senior Bofors officials to testify. A high-level team arrived in Delhi. The government prevented them from testifying before the JPC and the Swedes could only speak to a small group of officials. The justification offered for this strange turn of events was that the climate in the country had so turned against the government that even if the Swedes had spoken the truth, nobody would have believed them. There is documentary evidence that the script was rehearsed at a secret meeting in October 1987 so that everybody in India and Sweden sang from the same song sheet. As was expected, the JPC concluded that no bribes had been paid to the Indians. There was an element of black humour in this because on the very day the JPC gave the government a clean sheet in April 1988, I received a detailed briefing and the first set of documentary evidence showing direct links between the Bofors–India deal and illegal payments to the Hindujas.

The real breakthrough in the Bofors story came in spring 1988 when, during one of my trips to Stockholm, Sting invited me to help myself to a vast set of documents. Not knowing

where to begin and unable to search quickly enough to determine the relative worth of the documents, I took almost everything I could lay my hands on. These papers established beyond doubt that Bofors had lied to India when it said no commission had been paid for the gun deal. The documents included banks slips, internal Bofors discussion papers, the contracts between Bofors and the recipients as well as the account numbers and names of banks in Switzerland into which the bribes had been paid. These left gaping holes in the official Indian story. They showed that the 1986–87 payments were clearly linked to the sale of guns to India. The mass of evidence contained in at least three types of transaction documents established commission payments to three front organizations: Svenska Incorporated, Pitco-Moresco-Moineau and AE Services. The payments to Svenska continued at least until March 1987. In the case of Lotus-Tulip-Mont Blanc, a high level of secrecy was observed with the payment slips saying 'if possible do not write who the sender [Bofors] is'.

The AE Services payment was a curious one. The company had cut into the contract at the very last stage, assured Bofors that it would get the deal and accepted that it need not be paid if Sweden lost the contract. AE Services also cut into Win Chadha's entitlement. Chadha never went to court. I was intrigued by the contents of the notes and documents. In addition to the gun deal, some of them detailed shopping trips in Delhi. Sting said it was very common for criminals to keep detailed notes, as if cleansing their souls or, at worst, keeping a record to build a distance between themselves and their crimes.

No document told the full story. Many of them had to be pieced together for a picture to emerge. How much was 2.24 per cent of $1.2 billion? How much was 0.96 per cent of half of that paid in twelve instalments with currency fluctuations adjusted? Mathematics is Greek to me. This was turning into a nightmare as the story was now big news in India and everything I wrote could come back to haunt me. My husband, for whom

mathematics is what music is for most people, did the calculations, first with patience and after twelve months with an understandable sense of irritation because Bofors had entered my life and taken over my vocabulary. When we met as students in Stanford, USA, he was attending a course to prove that one is greater than zero. Throughout l'affaire Bofors, my husband was my worst critic and best friend, often telling me that knowing is one thing, proving another. Just like the difference between knowing that one is greater than zero and being able to prove it.

It was also very curious that AE Services was paid for no obvious work. 'This is the political payment—somebody very powerful,' Sting had said as we walked around Stockholm talking about the transactions. These people always come in towards the end of the negotiations and since they hold the political decision, their cut is never questioned, he said. Whenever he explained the documents to me, we spoke in wide, open spaces, parks and parking lots. I had seen films where men in trench coats talk as they walk in parks so as to avoid detection. This was the stuff of a thriller and it was happening to me.

Sixteen years later, some of the more bizarre twists and turns in this long and exasperating investigation still haunt me. It was not easy being a working mother. Nikhil was born in the middle of the story. I remember the combined frustration of my husband, my mother and my mother-in-law as I called Sting from my hospital bed an hour after Nikhil arrived. Running around for interviews and photocopying documents with tape recorder and feeding bottle in hand was routine. On one trip to India during the 1989 elections Nikhil saw the Bofors gun splashed on walls in Delhi and said, 'Mummy, Rajiv Gandhi.' And just the other day Nitya, our daughter, was rummaging in the attic and came across stacks of documents and files. 'Those are the Bofors files,' Nikhil told her and smiled at me. I still do not know if I should laugh or cry when I think of the investigation and its repercussions on my family.

Through the summer and autumn of 1988, Sting engineered the leak of another series of official documents. This set included the Swedish National Audit Bureau report and Martin Ardbo's detailed diaries together with another string of payment documents that showed the extent of the fraud. In this lot was the now famous Ardbo diary that detailed his deepest fears about being found out. One diary entry was a smoking howitzer. Ardbo had noted on 2 July 1987 that 'Bob had talked with Gandhi Trustee Lawyer'. The meeting took place in Geneva. Sting and I looked at each other as he translated this crucial entry. Nothing was said. I remember being truly frightened. This was the first time the Gandhi name had appeared in a document. 'This is probably as close as we will get to a cheque from Bofors,' he said.

In another entry, Ardbo noted that he was worried about 'Q because of his links to R'. Q for Quattrocchi. R for Rajiv Gandhi. Ardbo wrote a lot, in a highly stylized hand. And he was very nervous. 'The truth will go with me to my grave,' he had said often and refused to talk when Swedish investigators asked him about AE Services. 'I am being made a scapegoat to protect big people,' was something else he said. Irrefutable documentary evidence subsequently linked AE Services to Ottavio Quattrocchi.

Through 1998 and 1989, the Indian government refused to investigate the allegations, preferring instead to refer to the growing mass of documentary evidence as 'pieces of paper' fabricated by anti-nationals living abroad. Rajiv Gandhi dismissed me as a 'girl reporter'. Calculating the bribes in US dollars, Swedish crowns, English pounds and Indian rupees, wondering how to count 2.24 per cent and 0.96 per cent of the total bribe amount paid in several instalments, deciphering invoices and poring over a Swedish–English dictionary was now part of my daily routine. As tensions mounted, so did threats to my life. There were open inducements (women should cover art festivals, said one arms dealer linked to the pay-offs). My

car's brakes were disabled. There were those famous midnight calls of which we read. My bank accounts were broken into; unknown persons deposited money into my personal account from London. I was taken to court in the UK and Switzerland.

Sting, Snowman and my husband helped me through that difficult period. The strength of the documentary evidence I had put together with the assistance of Sting and Snowman stood me in good stead through that ordeal. As the stories began pouring out, I often asked myself what the price of my silence was. I remember not being afraid. Today, when I look back at those days, especially to a very difficult period towards the end of 1989, I worry that I was not worried.

Unwilling to take the media investigations seriously and unwilling to contact the Swedes or the Swiss to seek independent verification of the grave allegations, the CBI dug its head deeper into the ground. It announced that there was no point in seeking Swiss assistance (all the accounts were in Switzerland) because the Swiss are famously unhelpful when it comes to transparency in their banking system. They were silent on Sweden. The Congress party rallied around its leader. Snowman would tell me week after week that they had not asked for any official assistance from Switzerland. Any country seeking assistance in international criminal matters, or for information about secret Swiss bank accounts, has to first make an official request for such assistance with the Swiss government.

Towards the end of 1989, the Indian government began to feel hemmed in by the media revelations and both houses of Parliament were rocked daily. Official business ground to a standstill and debates were peppered with allegations and counter-allegations. Pushed to the wall, the government sought to introduce the Defamation Bill 1989 to gag the press. It was widely commented that *Hindu's* coverage had led to this move. The Indian press corps hit back and hundreds of journalists took to the streets, demanding that the bill be withdrawn. Journalists walked out of official press conferences across the

country and there were black-band marches in all metropolitan cities. It was at this juncture that government pressure was brought upon *Hindu* to stop the Bofors investigations. The newspaper caved in. Unable to publish, I was surprised at the speed with which offers from other newspapers landed on my desk. I worked out a joint arrangement with *Indian Express* and *Statesman* and eventually moved in full-time with the former to continue the investigative work. Those were heady days when the best in Indian journalism rose to defend democratic ideals and principles on the one hand and journalistic integrity on the other. This is where I trained and I consider India to be one of the world's best training grounds for journalists.

Following the persistent uproar in Parliament, the Opposition resigned en masse in the run-up to national elections in November 1989, taking the high moral ground about ethics, transparency and responsibility in public life. The V.P. Singh government rode to power on the wings of the Bofors revelations. Having won the elections, many members of Parliament in their new role as National Front ministers changed tack. It was business as usual. Arun Nehru, Rajiv Gandhi's cousin and a key member of his inner coterie, switched camps to join V.P. Singh. He later went on record to say that the time had come to put the Bofors issue behind the country as there was little point in being vindictive. Crime is constant. The scandal had become sustainable.

Through the personal attention and intervention of V.P. Singh, a formal investigation was launched in Switzerland in January 1990. Documents made available by Sting formed the basis of India's case. Between 1990 and 1997, regular attempts were made from India to scuttle the investigation in the Swiss courts. What was disturbing was that even ministers and lawyers sought to twist the story for narrow political ends. The Chandrasekhar and P.V. Narasimha Rao administrations fared no better.

Many Bofors moments remain etched in memory. Some are serious, others frightening and a few hilarious. There was a delicious moment when India's foreign minister, Madhavsinh Solanki, showed up as a clumsy postman. In 1992 much to the delight of my family and friends, Bofors was making its way out of my life. Nitya was a few months old and, this time around, there were going to be no interviews amid dealing with nappies and feeding bottles. Or so I thought. Late one evening in February the phone rang. It was Snowman, asking me to read a fax he had just sent. It was a copy of a letter from Solanki asking his Swiss counterpart to stop the Bofors investigations in Switzerland. The two had met at Davos. Solanki denied this; I produced the letter. Solanki resigned. The CBI did not ask Solanki who had asked him to play postman. The official Indian version said he acted on his own!

On 21 January 1997 when officials from the Swiss justice and police ministry handed over some 500 documents detailing the Swiss accounting of the bribes paid in connection with the Bofors deal, hope returned. Believing that justice would finally be done, Sten Lindstrom, who had led the Swedish investigations, broke a ten-year silence and told *Indian Express* that interrogating the Italian businessman Ottavio Quattrocchi was the key to the story.

Sixteen years after the scandal surfaced and six years after Switzerland transferred bank documents to India, exigencies of coalition politics ensure that no one is punished. For the record, the Bofors case continues to make its dreary way through the Indian courts. In the meantime, despite all the evidence establishing the fact of the bribes beyond doubt in one of the world's toughest courts, Switzerland, India is yet to reclaim the money from Bofors. I am told that Rs 64 crore is not a lot of money and that successive scams have made Bofors look like a warm-up sprint. Sixty-four crore is a lot of schools and a lot of primary health centres, not to mention incalculable self-respect for a nation desperately in need of it.

Logically, the Bofors scandal should have ended with Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. Soon after his death, I heard it said that even if he had taken money from Bofors, this was now in the past and of no interest to anybody. Everything had been overtaken by that dastardly crime. There are two issues here. Bofors was not only about Rajiv Gandhi. It is about the loss of accountability. It is about the failure of our elected representatives to ensure that the institutions they are elected to serve remain credible and responsible. It is a challenge that should contribute to institutional learning, not institutional bungling.

In addition, such was the nature of the Bofors scandal that nothing, not even Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, could diminish its lure. The real reason why Bofors remains a national obsession is not because we got a bad gun or because hundreds of crores changed hands. In fact, we got a good gun at a good price (excluding the bribes). 'Bofors will always exert a special hold on the national imagination because it was one scandal that made us lose our innocence and realise that all politicians, no matter how different they may seem, are at the end of the day, just the same,' wrote Vir Sanghvi in an editorial in *Seminar* in 2000. That probably sums up why Bofors and its ghosts continue to haunt us time and time again.

Every now and then Bofors comes back when people ask me for a detail or an explanation. Who is not corrupt, we say, when powerful people are caught with their hands in the till. Yet, when the woman who cleans our house or the man who sweeps our streets steals a piece of bread because he or she is hungry or naked, there is outrage. There is something about us in each of these scandals. There is something about our institutions in each of these issues that go unresolved. There is something about all of us in this feigned helplessness. Together we have contributed to making our institutions blind and deaf. Challenges such as the one raised by Bofors could ideally reinforce basic values and their corollary in institutional

learning. Instead, all of us have abdicated our responsibility. We have thereby created a situation where institutionally and emotionally our democracy remains feudal even though intellectually the men and women who helped craft our Constitution dreamt of a modern Indian state where there would be no place for the Nellie massacre, the Bhagalpur blindings and certainly zero tolerance for the annual starvation deaths in Kalahandi.

In a responsive democracy, coalitions that safeguard democratic principles and institutions are organized around common beliefs in core elements that, in principle, remain stable over a predictable period of time, much like the composition of the coalition itself. It is the responsibility of these groupings to learn about how the world operates and the effects of various governmental interventions in order to realize their goals over time. Responsible democracies cannot debate acceptability of thresholds of crime and certainly not expect criminal behaviour to be the constant glue of our politics. Unless of course we are talking about a coalition of criminals.

Our failure to arrest institutional slide in this area of policy has meant that since 1986 all defence contracts are on hold or moving at a speed much slower than the exigencies of national security. This is the consequence of shooting the messenger. In April 2002, the Government of India announced that a group of eminent Indians would vet all defence contracts before a final decision. What this means for institutional confidence, only time can tell. It is as if the ghost of Bofors will continue to influence the future till past dues are paid.

Tehelka: Hitting Dirt, Getting Hurt

TARUN J. TEJPAL

Four weeks after we broke our exposé Operation West End, on 13 March 2001, and changed our lives forever, I heard a most revealing and remarkable story. It came to me from a cameraman, an Indian who visited our office with an American crew. After the last question had been asked and answered—no different from a hundred other last questions and answers—and the interviewer was switching to a loose and chatty mode, the cameraman, winding up his wires, said tentatively, 'Sir I want to tell you a story before we go. It'll take only two minutes.'

The cameraman had just come back from Uttar Pradesh (UP), after visiting his village in Jaunpur. There, as in the cities, the chaupal conversations had revolved around the Tehelka findings. But there was an interesting difference. There, in the crevices of eastern UP, the villagers had no understanding of the medium the exposé had taken place in. They had seen it on television; they had read it up in the papers; and they knew there was a new kind of entity that was responsible for the story. But beyond that they were clueless. Clueless about the dotcom, clueless about the World Wide Web.

There was absolutely nothing in their experience or their imagination that could help them make any sense of a web site or the Internet. So they had conjured up a construct. Tehelka, for them, was a device by which '*subka bhrashtachar nanga ho jaata hai*' (everybody's corruption is revealed in all its nakedness). A kind of X-ray machine which exposed naked

anyone's corruption the moment they passed in front of it. The talk there, said the cameraman, was that the threat of the corruption-exposing machine was the reason the prime minister had not appeared in public for the first few days after the scam broke.

Nothing had prepared us for the avalanche of energies triggered by Operation West End. For months we had known that we had chanced upon a story of great gravity and impact. For months our dread had grown steadily as it became increasingly clear that this was not a story that stopped at a given point and offered itself up for analysis, criticism and policing. It was a story that went all the way to the top, and by doing so left little scope for face-saving manoeuvres: we could not get one part of the governmental hierarchy to police another, inferior, part of it. By indicting everyone we were risking taking on everyone, the entire system, all of government. My standard line to Aniruddha Bahal, who masterminded the investigation, used to be, 'We'll blow the whistle, but who's going to police this?'

More than two years later I can say—with sufficient evidence in the bank—that every worst fear has come to pass; each moment of dread that assailed us during those eight months has proven well founded. In many ways the establishment's conduct in the aftermath of Operation West End has been a greater scandal than the exposé itself; in many ways our efforts at defending the story and fighting off extra-constitutional abuse have been more labyrinthine and exhausting than the actual doing of the story.

To understand the importance, context and relevance of Operation West End—to fully learn its lessons—you have to study not just the exposé but what happened thereafter to those responsible for the exposé.

It is difficult to tell how we would have proceeded had we foreseen the avalanche of persecution, lies and deceit to follow. In retrospect our decision to refrain from attempting to read

the likely fallout was sound. Worrying about the future would have certainly impaired our ability to finish the story. It is just as well that we stuck to some fundamentals. We decided to keep our ears close to the ground. To maintain a narrow and purely journalistic frame of reference. We did not worry about who would gain or lose, or other consequences. We determined to stay with the story and just the story and to deliver it the moment it was done.

So there were two reasons why we were not prepared for the scale of the fallout. We had deliberately kept ourselves from thinking about it. And, like the residents of Jaunpur, there was nothing in our experience that could have helped us anticipate it.

Operation West End began like most stories in a quiet, modest way. In August 2000, Aniruddha Bahal, having overcome his disappointment over a major story he had been working on the for the past three months (it had seen him disappear for weeks in pursuit of the story), floated the idea of investigating the dubious nature of military purchases and the porosity of even a ministry as sensitive as defence.

Bahal has two traits that distinguish outstanding reporters: physical courage and a preternatural nose for the big story. When Indian reporters were writing florid accounts of the wondrous deeds of our cricketers, Bahal smelt the stench of match-fixing. When the establishment sought to treat defence as a holy cow, Bahal intuited that it was no more sacred than the average Indian shrine where the pandas, the keepers of temples, rip devotees of their last few rupees swiftly and seamlessly, converting piety into personal profit.

Bahal conceived the idea of Operation West End in the context of several things. The immediate provocation was the fire at the Bharatpur ammunition depot that consumed crores worth of equipment. The rumour mills suggested it was basically a set-up to destroy inferior purchases. Also on our minds were the nagging questions relating to the Kargil war.

Both Bahal and I had been at *Outlook* during the Kargil war. He had covered the last phases of it as a reporter; and, as the magazine's managing editor, I had played a role in shaping *Outlook*'s editorial policy on the conflict. Our position had been very clear. During the course of the war we had worked within a tightly nationalistic frame, carefully avoiding stories and pictures that could demoralize our troops or the war effort.

But the moment the conflict was over, we adopted the more critical, questioning stance that is the hallmark of good journalism and began to ask all the uncomfortable questions that confronted us. For us the sum total of the picture was that the troops did a great job, but the military and civilian leadership tripped up seriously. Of course in no time at all the establishment's storm troopers were in action trying to obfuscate the questions in a web of denials and counter-charges. Yet the questions remained, and most people were left with the lingering feeling that all was not well with the defence establishment.

The third factor prompting the story was an old one: the fifteen-year-old Bofors-fuelled controversy about kickbacks in defence deals. The controversy had ravaged Indian public life for years, and had in 1989 led to a ban on defence middlemen. Since then on different occasions, different defence ministers, including George Fernandes two years earlier had asserted that their inquiries revealed there were no more defence middlemen operating in India.

But the truth that every one of Delhi's chattering power elite knows is that the city crawls with defence middlemen; that the best farmhouses that gird the city are owned by defence middlemen; the most expensive cars are driven by defence middlemen; the most lavish parties are thrown by them. They may work under different guises and labels, but then no crook nails a plaque on his door saying 'crook'.

It was in the backdrop of all this—Kargil, Bharatpur, the middlemen controversy—that Bahal and his Falstaffian sidekick, Samuel Mathew, an investigative reporter of

extraordinary grit and resourcefulness, began working their story. Over the next few weeks they did some background sleuthing and chanced upon a defence product that was in line for purchase: a hand-held thermal camera.

Neither of them knew anything about the product. They downloaded information on it from the Net, and with the help of Tehelka's design department created a brochure on it and printed it in-house. They also formed a dummy company, naming it West End International. This phase of the operation was replete with literary allusions that escaped notice in the furore that followed.

The thermal camera was christened Lepak by Bahal, a reference to the Lepak gun, which can glue together formations of fighter planes in the sky, that Yossarian waxes about in *Catch-22*. The logo of West End International was taken from a book jacket that the design department had made as a dummy presentation for one of V.S. Naipaul's books.

Armed with this rudimentary paraphernalia, Bahal and Mathew sailed into one of the most audacious journalistic stings ever. They started at the bottom of the defence food chain, their first contact being a section officer in the ministry of defence. He 'earned' Rs 2000 off them. And then, before they knew it, they were sucked into a web of graft and wheeler-dealers. Over the next few months the heart of the system was bared to them. It was an ugly sight. It throbbed solely to the music of money; its most salient characteristic was greed.

As Tehelka's reporters discovered, everyone—army officers, bureaucrats, arms dealers and politicians—was willing to push anything as long as there was a kickback in the offing. The avarice was naked, completely transparent. Percentages and commissions were openly discussed; help of all kinds was generously offered to circumvent the system. In a spirit of camaraderie, the secrets of other dubious deals were served up; credentials were established by flaunting rosters of personal corruption.

There was no trace of shame, no intrusions of conscience. Tyros in matters of defence hardware, totally ignorant of the subtleties of financial skulduggery, Bahal and, particularly, Mathew made enough gaffes to render some moments pure slapstick. Asked about West End's bank at one meeting Mathew replied, 'Thomas Cook.' On another occasion he said the head office of the company was based in Manchester United. My own favourite is his answer to a question about the range of the thermal binocular. 'Unlimited,' said Mathew cheerily. 'Unlimited?' goggled the interlocutor. 'Well, it blurs after a point,' admitted Mathew. Arundhati Roy's favourite moment is Mathew's description of the product range of his company as including 'typical type of bombs'.

To my mind, there are only two explanations for this incredible lack of any discernment on the part of those who manned the defence gravy train. The first is that the greed was so blinding that they could see nothing else. The second is that deals of this kind were so quotidian, so everyday, that there was no reason for anyone to suspect anything. But it would be a big mistake to conclude that the entire operation was a vaudeville affair, starring a couple of bumbling reporters.

The truth is that Bahal and Mathew planned each sting with meticulous care (in fact neither took a single day off for six months). Bahal would give thorough briefings to Mathew, who then carried out most of the stings. The devices would be checked and rechecked—in the knowledge that they could land one set of confessions, or capture the transaction of a deal, only once. The venues would be reconnoitred in advance. They would tick off detailed checklists (which grew more elaborate as the cast of characters increased and with it the possibilities of an unintentional gaffe). And having done all that both of them would turn to God. Before every operation, Mathew would visit a church, and Bahal would nip into a temple.

Even with God by their side, Bahal and Mathew had to display exceptional courage. People keep asking me about the

nature of the equipment, especially the cameras the team used. All that is idiot stuff, not rocket science. The cameras were just low-end devices which could be purchased or put together at any electronics outlet. The gumption of those who used it is what really mattered. Had they been discovered at any point the consequences could have been fatal. It requires singular commitment to wire yourself up and enter the defence minister's house. It is not difficult to imagine what would have happened to Mathew had he been caught in the act. They would have taken him to the cleaners: his work would have been trashed; his life would have been forfeited.

The fact is that there was continuous tension, and it mounted with every passing month as the final contours of the story began to unfold. By the time Bahal and Mathew nailed the BJP president, Bangaru Laxman, and walked out of his room with a demand for US $30,000 ringing in their ears, it was January 2001, and the story had pretty much played itself out. To proceed any further we needed two things: more money and the actual product—the hand-held thermal camera. And since we had neither, the curtains were drawn on the fieldwork by the middle of January, and the tedious task of transcribing, scripting and editing the evidence began.

An operations centre was set up. Two large rooms in our office were cordoned off, their windows blacked out with cardboard. Until this moment a mere six of us in the office knew of the investigation; now fifteen staffers were handpicked from different departments—television, investigations and Tehelka—and conscripted for transcribing almost 100 hours of tape. The entire team worked around the clock in shifts, in total secrecy—with Bahal administering the omertà (the mafia oath of silence) every day. No sooner did the thick, bound transcripts begin to emerge than Bahal began to script the story. Though edited, the first cut clocked over seven hours. Bahal then had another go, and ruthlessly hacked it down to a little over four hours.

The consensus was that even this was too long for anyone to sit through. With song, dance, hero, heroine, villain, a Hindi film can become tedious at under three hours. Our earlier investigation into match-fixing in cricket, Fallen Heroes, had been just an hour and a half long and had the attraction of starring famous players, and a subject everyone was crazy about. In the case of Operation West End the dramatis personae consisted largely of unknowns, and the subject matter was far less accessible and exciting. Faced by this, we took a decision that strengthened our belief and resolve in what we were doing. We decided the story was way too serious, and went beyond the normal issues of mass media: viewer interest, accessibility, attention spans and so on. We decided we would give the story the space required to establish itself. If it needed more than four hours to play itself out and prove its findings, so be it.

That decision was to prove critical. It liberated us. Over the coming weeks, as the odds increased and the pressure of investments, funding, friends, foes, ethics, motives, legal notices, threats, phone tapping, surveillance, et al., mounted, as we were hit by gunfire and hurricane, we took refuge in the certainty of the story. We held on to the central principle around which the entire universe of journalism rotates: the truth-revealing story. We were journalists and had done a journalistic investigation, and that, in sum, was it. All the other shrapnel flying around, all the other gales hammering into us, could not damage that core truth, and could not blow us away.

The final tape was ready by 12 March. Less than twenty-four hours later, on 13 March, we broke the story in the ballroom of Delhi's Imperial Hotel. The screening was scheduled for 1.30 p.m. The editors arrived at the Tehelka office at nine and began to punch the phones. I made some mandatory calls. One was to Amitabh Bachchan, who was on my board of directors and of whose public position I was conscious. The second was to Shankar Sharma, of First Global, our angel investors. And another was to Subhash Chandra of Zee, who

had shaken hands with us for a second-round investment some weeks ago. I felt I owed them all an alert. But none of them was given any details, just informed that we would be breaking a very important story that afternoon.

We had got so far, but the tension had not stopped mounting. In a display of amazing commitment the twenty-odd people who had worked on preparing the tapes had maintained the omertà, but there was always the fear of a last-minute slip. And so even on the last morning most of us woke—virtually unslept—on tenterhooks.

That morning I personally met half a dozen important personalities—none of them politicians. We may have been naive but we were not so foolish as to be unaware of the sheer gravity of what we were doing. We were also not unaware of the entrenched vested interests our story would end up hurting. I felt the need to make sure that nothing, neither envy nor doubt, unravelled the story once it broke. I also felt the need to rally the great and the good behind us.

We were on a razor's edge until the screening actually began. About 300 people—among them retired generals, bureaucrats, media persons and then, as word spread, politicians—came, not quite sure what to expect. It was only as the tapes began to roll and the story of Operation West End began to enter the public domain that the tension began to drain. Now nothing could pre-empt us, nothing could trip up the story. For better or worse, it would soon cease to be our sole, onerous responsibility. Our duty was done; our work was over. The story was out in the open. It belonged to everyone now. Henceforth it was everyone's duty and responsibility. Not ours alone.

Acts of courage in journalism are predicated on a singular belief: that once the story and the truth is delivered to the people, the collective will kicks in, providing privilege and protection to the journalists.

In some crucial ways, in our case it did not quite turn out like that. True, the story did command the public domain, and ended up acclaimed by all—politicians, public, the media. But, sadly, it did not leave us as we had hoped. At the press conference after the screening, we had made it clear that as far as we were concerned our role was over. We had followed what had seemed like a good story; it had turned out to be better than just a good story; we had broken it the moment it was ready; and now we were out of it. The truth and morality of the story concerned us; the politics of it did not.

At that same press conference—the first of many to follow—we also said we did not set out to get any individual. The story took us where it went. It led the reporters to Bangaru Laxman and Jaya Jaitley, characters who did not exist in our mindscape when the investigation began. We also said that we had nothing against the BJP or the Samata Party. We were sure that had such an investigation been carried out under any other regime, whether Congress or the Third Front, the chances were high that the results would have been the same. We said we were sure if you changed the entire cast of characters the results of investigation would have been the same. In other words, the problems we had unearthed were endemic and not limited to any one party or person. They were a wake-up call for everybody.

We have repeated our independent stance ad nauseum since, but everyone had stopped listening from Day One itself. The Congress and other opposition parties sought with predictable cynicism to extract every kind of mileage from it (and did that poorly as ever). However, it was the BJP's strangely cussed, almost immoral reaction that was the most disappointing. The party and the prime minister, a man many of us admire, felt no compulsion to display a sense of outrage.

The moral high ground of governance was abandoned for indulgence in inter-party bickering. Ill-conceived attempts were

made to paint it as a ruling party versus opposition game. This it was not. First and last it was a story about corruption and decay. This was not like Bofors or dozens of other similar controversies. This was not a case of one political party casting aspersions on another. This was a purely journalistic story, with not a trace of political motivation. There was also no web of confusing arguments or grey areas. Operation West End was not about accusations. It was about evidence. People had heard it and seen it.

By any reckoning what had been exposed was distressing. The picture was so perverse that it demanded a modicum of contrition. One end of the frame showed dedicated soldiers serving out the prime of their lives in the most inhospitable conditions for a few thousand rupees a month while at the other end, sleazy fat cats cut dubious deals worth hundreds of crores in Delhi.

To then deny it all and try and oilily slither past a people waiting for answers was a grave mistake. Those in power needed to reach out for the magical redemptions of honesty and contrition. It would have created a state of grace; it would have succoured a smarting nation.

In the long run, I do not think the Tehelka exposé will do the ruling party as much damage as the party's handling of the entire affair and its abject response to the tapes. The spectacle of a much-loved prime minister evading and then denying vivid proof of corruption was a deeply diminishing one. It was a wounding reminder that we must never expect too much of our leaders, a sad reminder once again that there is no higher conscience to which we can appeal. In the cesspool of Indian politics and power, conscience is an eel forever wriggling out of grasp.

Had the prime minister simply admitted that yes, something was gravely wrong, yes, the guilty would be brought to book, yes, he remained committed to weeding out corruption, it would have buoyed the nation. Even if he had then gone on to do

nothing. The truth is people need action; and when they do not get action they at least need the words. The right words. But when we get neither—not action, not words—we are left with nothing. We become lost wanderers in the vast aridities of public space, with no moral compasses to set our journeys by, no shining beacons to guide our steps home.

I say we are left with nothing, yet, unexpectedly, we may be left with something. By this time we had begun to fend the accusations (the detective in the dock, even as the accused launched on a cross-examination).

- Motives? None; it was a purely journalistic story.
- Affiliations? None, neither political, nor business.
- Ownership? Owned and managed by media professionals.
- Funding? Venture capital.
- Methodology? Legitimate and time-tested. Reporters and spycams.
- Ethics? Above board; did not pry into anyone's private life; only exposed the abuse of public money and public office.

By the time we had finished with our explanations, the story had become much larger than anything we had done. We watched it acquire a life of its own with as much awe as anybody else. When I went to speak at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) there was an electric atmosphere. Highly informed but agitated students were unwilling to listen to the BJP's K.R. Malkani's facile excuses. At the time I said that if the story we had done was the size of the pencil I was holding, the quantum of energy it had released was bigger than the spacious JNU campus (with its parks and ravines).

We believe that. All we did was a story. The staggering goodwill we have received in the last two years and the tsunami of reactions that have followed have been a most humbling experience. To be stopped on the road, in restaurants, airports and be thanked by unknown people—to be invited, feted,

cheered on—is way more than any journalist expects for anything he does.

Making sense of this order of response is difficult. I have applied the pop psychology that is every mass media person's stock-in-trade. Is it that we, as a people, have become so desperately cynical that even a glimmer of light seems a huge ray of hope? Or is the outrage because Operation West End holds up a mirror, and the image we see of ourselves is really ugly? Or could it be that personal and public degeneration has finally attained critical mass, releasing energy that could break a dam filled with pent-up frustration and fury?

More qualified people may make better sense of the phenomenon, but I have some sense of the residual impact of Operation West End. The most astonishing in my judgement is the fact that corruption at least once again became an issue in India. For the last decade, since V.P. Singh fought the 1989 election on the Bofors issue, corruption had been a non-issue. It seemed as if we had given up on it. But suddenly it is the one thing that seems to dominate private and public discourse—through petrol pump scams and land scams. At least we see corruption once again, even if fleetingly, for the cancer it is.

A second, important impact has a more incestuous air. The story will hopefully serve as a reminder of the continuing power of the media. It is a reminder that good stories can make a difference, a lesson most of us (including this writer who has occupied several senior editorial positions during this period) had forgotten in the last ten years. It is no idle thought that if Indian journalism were to break five major stories like this every year, those in public life would be forced to clean up their act.

In a way it is also a reminder that in a poor democracy like ours the press has a quintessentially adversarial role that should never be diluted. Curiously, in the weeks following the Tehelka story any number of Western journalists who came to see me would ask why India never had any sexual scandals. For me

the answer was simple. We are a very poor country, and in the hierarchy of scandals, the only really important scandals are the financial ones. Money misused, money siphoned off, money wasted is what hurts us. The sex scandal comes way down in the hierarchy. It means nothing, concerns no one, does not exist in the public domain. It is basically a first-world indulgence, a means to group voyeurism and artificial excitement.

We in the media tend to make oracles of anyone in the news. Fashion designers and beauty queens are asked to comment on everything, from food to politics, and they do, with grace and authority. So, my fellow-journalists inevitably deliver the coup de grace and ask me, what can be done? The rot runs deep. How can it be reversed?

I have no idea. Or at least none better than the next person. I can only think of the same clichés. Claw back the credibility of the key institutions: the police, the judiciary, the media. In other words, do not expect self-restraint to solve the problem. Build enough deterrence. Then the next cliché: start with yourself, and try and call a halt to corruption at a personal level. I confess I do amuse myself sometimes with fanciful ideas. If in the past one hundred years we could go from being a feudal people to a colonial state to an independent, modern democracy, can we not in the next fifty years move from degradation and corruption to some state of grace?

When we launched Tehelka in March 2000 we made some immodest claims. We said we wanted to rediscover the distinction between journalism, public relations, advertising and entertainment. A distinction that had been blurred in the 1990s by a combination of satellite television, colour pages in the newspapers, the first giddiness of liberal consumerism and co-optation by politics and business. We felt it was tragic that by the end of the 1990s, every senior journalist and significant publication in India could be identified with a political party or business house.

We said we too loved trivia, we too had friends among

politicians and businessmen, but we believed that at its core journalism was a serious business and moral commitment. It was founded on the bedrock of uncomfortable questions, not comfortable alignments; its true pillars were moral pillars, not clever sentences or pretty pictures.

Since I was a journalist of the early 1980s, I made loud statements about trying to bring back the hard journalism of that period, a decade when all the major issues of the day were brought into the public domain and fought over by print journalists. Not just centred, but scrapped and fought over.

Our experience has at best been mixed and not one that yields easy guidelines. Today Tehelka has impossible fame and incredible goodwill, but no money and very few staffers. When we broke Operation West End, we were an office of 115 people; now we are less than five, and there have been the unpaid loyalists. With utter dishonesty and brazenness the government has targeted and victimized us. We have been accused of being ISI agents, Hinduja stooges, a Congress set-up, in Dawood Ibrahim's pay, and stock market manipulators. Our phones have been tapped and every agency of the government from the Enforcement Directorate to the CBI put on our tail. Wild theories have been concocted; our journalists have been arrested. What we exposed has been set aside; we have become the story.

Easily the most shameful act of the government has been the unconscionable destruction of Shankar Sharma and Devina Mehra of First Global, Tehelka's angel investors. This brilliant young couple, globally recognized analysts and brokers, have had their lives and businesses wrecked by a vengeful establishment for no other reason than that they invested in Tehelka at the height of the dotcom boom, and happen to own 14.5 per cent shares in the company. Their businesses have been shut down, their properties attached, their travel barred and their bank accounts seized. Shankar Sharma has also been

twice arrested on the flimsiest of charges, spending as much as two and a half months in jail the second time around.

Apart from trying to teach the innocent a lesson, a venal government has also tried to ensure that no other investor casts a prospective eye on Tehelka.

It is important to note that the sheer vileness of the government's assault on First Global has been subsequently highlighted by the Joint Parliamentary Committee report on the stock market crash of March 2000. The report—prepared under the aegis of this very government—while slamming several crooks and manipulators, carries not a word of blame against either First Global or Tehelka.

For Tehelka itself the most insidious trap has been the commission—now commissions—of inquiry. First the Venkatswami Commission of Inquiry, subsequently aborted, which many would insist was instituted primarily to defuse the crisis. By making Tehelka an integral part of the commission's probe, we were for eighteen long months steadily drained of all our time and resources. At the time of its constitution, A.G. Noorani presciently wrote that including Tehelka in the terms of reference of the commission was a disastrous precedent. It would now allow the government to shoot the messenger, rather than heed the message every time it was criticized or exposed.

In our case Noorani's presentiment has proven ominously well founded. The government's track record at the commission has been one of unmitigated shame, replete with half-truths and lies.

The government, the ostensible keeper of probity and governance, displayed crass mala fides before the commission. It has chosen to protect the corrupt while attacking the whistle-blowers. It filed hundreds of pages of malicious and false affidavits against Tehelka, and not a line against any of the thirty-odd people found guilty of corruption. Its legal luminaries

spent weeks cross-examining Tehelka, while steadfastly refusing to cast even an accusatory word against those caught with their hands in the till.

Why and how does such immorality flower?

Tehelka has faced continuous attrition. For sixteen months, the commission took over our lives, and attending to it became the only work we could do. Fourteen lawyers represented Tehelka before the commission, and our journalists put in more than 50,000 man-hours on commission-related work. Big media organizations would have been stretched; we were decimated. Operation West End began in August 2000; broke in March 2001; and is still playing itself out in June 2003.

Justice Venkatswami was perhaps no more than six months away from completing his report when he tendered his resignation. This followed criticism of his acceptance of another official assignment for which he had been recommended by the Chief Justice of India even while seized of the Tehelka matter. There are some who say his exit was engineered: he was proving fairer than expected. Now there is a new judge aboard, and his calls from the outset have been mystifying and distressing. The proceedings of the commission have attracted derision. For a long time there were two dozen players—including the government—trying to score a goal against one tiny defender, Tehelka. Now with Tehelka opting out—no resources, no time, no faith—there is no defender in there, just a rampaging army of the guilty slamming in the goals.

Guilty: 100. Whistle-blowers: 0. Untruth: 100. Truth: 0. And the taxpayers' money steadily leaking out, not to arrive at justice but to steer away from it.

And there is enough evidence to suggest that it is one incensed, morally deluded person who appears to be intent on perverting the process to prevent accountability. One more glaring example of how the Indian official system can be hijacked by a single individual for personal profit, glory or exoneration.

Calculate the torque in all of this prolonged battle, and wonder how many media organizations will dare take on high-level corruption in future.

It has been a long, arduous and exhilarating two years at Tehelka. There are things we have managed to pull off, and others that have worsted us. We have done some things well and some not so well. Yes, there may be glitches in Operation West End, errors of omission and exactitude. These have to be viewed in perspective, keeping in mind the scale of the story and the dangers involved. No investigative story in recent times has risked more and taken on more. Operation West End had no cautiously strapped on life jacket of secret lobbies, finances or strategies. Tehelka had to depend only on itself and its innate moral strength to swim all the way to the shore.

Vested interests have tried to distract from our story by focusing on the female companions arranged by the reporters for some army officers. I have admitted that this was an ethical transgression on our part. In defence I can only say that there are several mitigating factors. The reporters took the decision to arrange female companions in the heat of the chase, convinced that if they ceased to behave like arms dealers, who routinely provide money, booze and women, they could derail the story. Before trashing their judgement, everyone must give pause and retain perspective. We must not forget that what the story eventually unveiled was monumental.

It would also be useful to remember that Operation West End consists of more than 100 tapes, whereas the scurrilous ones are less than two. It might also help to flip the coin to see what else it reveals: for it also shows that army officers are willing to cut deals in exchange for a few hours with an unknown woman. And that is as disastrous as the taking of money.

Most importantly, everyone would do well to remember where the tapes came from. Tehelka gave them, both to the army court of inquiry and to the Venkatswami Commission of

Inquiry. If our intentions were mala fide, if there was a shadow across our souls, we could have easily thrown away those two tapes and no one would have known a thing. The fact is that having shot the tapes, Tehelka behaved most honourably: it neither exploited them nor suppressed them. We saw their relevance in the judicial process and accordingly handed them over.

There is one other great red herring the guilty keep dragging across the trail: the tapes were doctored. The insistence on a forensic examination is a simple ploy to somehow cast a cloud of doubt on the authenticity of the tapes and under that cover make a bolt for honour and freedom. We despair for such an exercise because in the last two and a half years we have learned not to trust the government's intentions in the least: we worry for what report they will conjure up; we worry for what may have already happened to the tapes that lie in their custody.

Let me just say for the nth time that not a frame has been doctored; and both experts and judges have given it a clean chit several times over the last two years. The more significant fact still is that in the cross-examinations in the commission each of the accused has by now already confirmed their presence on the tapes, and their taking of the money.

Given the scale of the assault on it, there are many who wonder if Tehelka will survive. There are others who wonder if individually each of us will. At the moment Tihar jail houses five undertrials ostensibly contracted to kill me and Bahal. The government for a long time had, unilaterally, given us extensive security cover, and wherever we went carbine-toting policemen accompanied us. Samuel too must inevitably live under as great a threat. We do not know the truth of these dangers. The only way we deal with it is to not think about it.

We think about the stuff that is harder still: how to make both journalism and the business of journalism work? One we have some sense of; the other we are perilously discovering. The odds against a group of journalists like us are long. But we

are determined to give it our all. If goodwill were resources, we would have more than we ever needed. I believe Tehelka has a place and a future. In its sufferings I see the seeds of an important independent media platform—one that is aligned to no political party or business house, but committed solely to the public interest.

I am determined to keep Tehelka from becoming a 'bad story': do the right thing, suffer for it and be shut down. I want it to be a 'good story': do the right thing, you may have to pay a heavy price for it, but you will succeed in the end. As a country we are full of too many bad stories. That is one of the reasons few people do the right thing. What is the moral underpinning of the universe if the right and the good keep losing? Societies that are full of good stories are societies that are in efflorescence; societies that are dominated by bad stories are societies in terminal decline.

Tehelka, because of its immense connection with the people, because of its immense metaphorical power, needs to be a good story. For two and a half years we have been trashed, made to suffer, destroyed; but I am convinced that from this debris will arise something of enduring value, far more refined than the original, even more aligned to core democratic and journalistic principles.

Operation West End gave over on 13 March 2001. For two years we grimly carried out Operation Hang-in-There. For the last six months we have been working every day on Operation Comeback.

Of course like the residents of Jaunpur, there is nothing in our experience or imagination that can tell us how it will all finally unfold.

Communal Violence: From Select Pogroms to Full-Blown Genocide

TEESTA SETALVAD

Bhagwo dupatto ane dekhai evo tillo (saffron scarf and a visible, prominent bindi) I was told would be the basic required camouflage if one contemplated stepping out of the confines of Ahmedabad city and visiting the sites of savagery in far-flung villages and districts of Panchmahal, Kheda, Anand and Dahod. That was on 4 March 2002.

I was sitting in a home at Jamalpur, recording horrified testimonies of an anguished people, outraged not only that such meticulously pre-planned militia attacks on a minority had been masterminded and allowed but that even health service and medical practitioners had succumbed to a vicious ethnic cleavage. The proffered advice took me back ten years when the pogrom in Mumbai after the demolition of the Babri Masjid had rendered my personal relationship with my bindi ambivalent. Those who knew me in my adolescent years associated my sari or salwar-kameez with a visible spot on the forehead, in myriad colours. Mumbai 1992–93 changed all that. The shame of what could be perpetuated in the name of the faith to which I was born made me revolt against the tangible association I had with it. My bindi is no more a fixation. I either wear it or not, depending on more material considerations than the traditional association that had me sport it before.

Since the state's highways and state-run hospitals were being policed by trained squads of the Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu

Parishad (VHP), supported by elected representatives wearing the badge of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), such street-smart advice was not unwelcome. Few car drivers were willing to risk being out in the madness of mob rule and a narrative of those days needs to record the inevitable tussle and arguments with them as they obviously hated what we were making them do.

Already on this first day in Ahmedabad, 4 March 2002, I had spent over fifteen hours speaking to the child and women victims of Naroda Gaon and Naroda Patiya. Kauser Bano's tale—that of a nine-month pregnant woman, close to term, being dragged and assaulted by a lustful mob—had been recounted to me in staccato tones by her father that very day. 'They slit her stomach where my grandchild, a boy, had been nurtured, dragged the baby out, pierced it with a sword, swirled it around and then hurled it into a fire. Then they turned to her, attacked her with swords and flung her into the fire. I sat watching, trembling and breaking inside. There was nothing I could do.' His voice broke when he spoke of the grandchild who was never born and tears silently poured down his cheeks. He was numbed and crippled by this impotence that would haunt him all his life.

Staring at me blankly without seeing, he said he now had nothing to live for. The gold ring that he wore would be used to bear the costs of his funeral. Young Javed, the only other survivor in this family, tried desperately to get a word in, to speak of himself and the fact that now only the two of them remained. It was a bid to pull Kauser Bano's father out from the stupor of grief. 'Is this young boy all you have?' I asked. 'Yes,' he nodded numbly.

Apart from the obvious plight of the surviving 1,75,000 or more victims, now brutally shorn of hearth and home, their first day in refugee camps was traumatic for other reasons too. Vicious hatred and violence had made victims of many friends and activists who, because of their identity, had been unable to

stir out until then. Together we shared our traumas. We would remember this first step out of homes and the confines of fear and terror for a long, long time.

From the day I reached Ahmedabad and thereafter trudged through the villages in district after district in Gujarat along with Raisbhai Khan, it was clear that the tragedy demanded a thorough investigation and factual account of what had transpired. Our efforts over the next few weeks resulted in Genocide Gujarat 2002 (*Communalism Combat*, March–April 2002, special issue). But a more immediate task was to reach the country and the world through regular on the spot updates. The President, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the media and the police were among those addressed with regard to what we saw and heard. It was important to disseminate the chilling details. The purpose was not merely to report and analyse but to try and intervene and pre-empt the unfolding tragedy enacted with methodical pre-planning by bringing these ghastly events into the open.

It is when I did this again in Gujarat 2002, ten years after Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993, that the dual role and demands thrust on a journalist covering violence and conflict played out. It became incumbent then, as ten years before and innumerable times in between, to intervene as much as report and analyse events. For some of us journalists covering communal violence, reporting and analysing all its facets and the access we gained to persons, locales, officials and agencies demanded that we straddle two realities, both equally compelling. Each of us had simultaneously to be both a media practitioner and a citizen concerned with pre-empting violence.

Three days later, on 7 March 2002, I relayed Kauser Bano's story to a dear friend, Javed Akhtar, as he nervously prepared for his part on New Delhi Television's *The Big Fight* that week. Even while at the very door of the studio, he relentlessly cross-checked each detail yet again though he had been on the phone with me every day for the past four days. 'Is the story of Kauser

Bano 100 per cent true? Can you vouch for it again?' Yes, yes and yes, I told him as I narrated details of over sixty-five testimonies that I had recorded that week. His stand on the television programme that weekend shook the country as he portrayed with outrage and anger the horror of the Gujarat genocide. Anmol Malaviya's poem in Hindi, *To Kauser's Unborn Daughter,* was another rare creative response to the agony and shame of Gujarat.

Through the weeks of December 1992 and January 1993, our home (husband-colleague, Javed Anand, then deputy editor with *Sunday Observer,* and mine) along with those of at least eight other journalists in Mumbai served as mini-control rooms where distress calls were received and then relayed to the police. Otherwise, the authorities were not inclined to heed complaints coming from a certain section of the population: Muslims.

Men and women in public life felt the humiliation of being rebuffed with sordid words like 'We have been asked not to entertain comments from Muslims.' Worse, they had to suffer the insult of having the phone banged down on them by police functionaries once they made their identities known.

It fell to me one night in early January 1993 to call Mumbai's then police commissioner, Srikant Bapat, at 1 a.m. after the police repeatedly ignored frantic pleas of victims from Agripada and Vikhroli bastis. Bapat's irate response at my daring to break protocol and disturb him at such an unseemly hour met with no regret from me. I patiently explained that I too, along with dozens of other conscientious citizens who had by then set up Citizens for Peace to receive distress calls, took no pleasure in disturbing him. Had the police done their duty and responded appropriately, we would have had no cause to meddle. If however they did not respond, we were left with little choice.

It was a nightly experience that I would relive from 27 February to 4 March 2002 when I received 200–250 calls every day. There were calls from Vatwa, Naroda Patiya, Naroda

Gaon, Gulberg Society, Mariambi ni Chali, Shahpur, Jamalpur, Shah-e-Alam, Rakhial, Gomtipur, Sarkhej, (all in Ahmedabad), Gandhinagar, Bharuch-Jambusar, Chhotaudaipur, Godhra, Halol, Kalol and Vadodara.

Mobile telephones had ten years later revolutionized communications. We had the cell phone numbers of the commissioners of police of Ahmedabad and Vadodara, P.C. Pandey and D.D. Tuteja, and those of the additional and deputy commissioners of police of Ahmedabad, and senior police inspectors of other districts. Victims from across Gujarat too used these means to convey their desperate pleas for help, in vain. The most brazen officers used simply to switch off their mobiles. Others took calls but did not necessarily respond to them. Sections of the police connived with well-orchestrated mobs to deny surviving victims access to escape routes. Some of us independently informed Chief Secretary Subha Rao and senior officers in the police force in Ahmedabad, including Pandey, of the situation on the ground and the victims' acute distress. I even made dozens of anxious calls from faraway Mumbai.

I remember receiving a particular call on the afternoon of Friday, 1 March, after the massacre at Naroda Gaon, Naroda Patiya and Gulberg Society, that pierced the shield of frenzied activity under which I had cloaked all emotion until then. The caller was a dear friend and senior journalist in Ahmedabad now stranded with his wife and two young girls in the building in which his newspaper was located. The proprietor was away and a mob had targeted this area due to its specific demographic characteristics.

Following three earlier calls from him I had already made frenzied calls to Pandey and Tandon, the deputy commissioner of police. Obviously to little avail. The mobs were getting closer, carried arms and looked determined. When I called back within minutes (twelve to be precise) to inquire if things had improved and any forces had been sent, he replied brokenly that I might

perhaps be speaking to him for the last time.

All restraint crumbled and I jabbed at my mobile to call a person who I look upon as a friend in the Gujarat police but whose identity I cannot reveal for obvious reasons. He was not located in Ahmedabad but in a neighbouring district, where he had successfully controlled VHP efforts to disrupt the peace. I now appealed to him, not as a journalist friend but in demanding, near hysterical tones, 'Can you not do just this much? Save the Shah-e-Alam area from this murderous mob.' It would be a conceited and exaggerated claim that it was this that saved the area from what could have been another Naroda-type carnage, in the nick of time. In the midst of bad news made worse by the minute, it is human to remember the thin, silver linings on otherwise bleak days. This was one of possibly several other such frantic efforts made all over Ahmedabad and the rest of the state to save lives and halt violence.

For days and nights on end, through weeks that ran into mid-May in the first round, every moment involved not only collecting data, visiting trouble spots and interviewing victims and the authorities but also being on a state of high alert, receiving SOS calls and despairing pleas, suspending all else to respond and speaking to the police and Army in a bid to stave off further violence. Only later did the totality of the horror seep in. Subha Rao had received no less than three dozen communications from me over the past year.

From mid-May until around July 2002 an uneasy peace prevailed, though sustained with difficulty amid reports of economic and social boycott in villages where refugees had dared to return.[1]

In the early days of the Gujarat genocide, some of us appealed to the Indian political class, the opposition Congress, CPI (M), Samajwadi Party and independent members of

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[1] Refugee Survey, *Communalism Combat,* June–July 2002

Parliament (MPs) to visit the violence-torn areas while the madness raged to create a moral space on the streets that had been claimed by unreason and hatred. The effort succeeded to the extent that a delegation did fly down. It consisted of the CPI (M) central committee member Sitaram Yechury, Samajwadi Party leaders Amar Singh and Raj Babbar, and independent MP Shabana Azmi.

This group landed in Ahmedabad late on 1 March 2002, but in truth failed to achieve anything more than a declaration of good intent. Hope had been aroused among the victims that such a visit would exert moral and physical pressure on a callous government and administration paralysed by a fascist endeavour. For a variety of reasons that are difficult to verify, the esteemed group returned to Delhi the next morning without touring the streets or meeting the victims.

Chief Minister Modi's mild warning of possibly dire consequences should they move out of the circuit house or differences within the group itself are among the reasons given for the failure of the mission. Whatever the factors, it was a letdown by the political class which is getting increasingly removed from violence and unused to direct intervention when hell and mayhem break loose. The only political figures visible on the streets of Ahmedabad in those first manic days were Mayor Himmatsingh Patel and Union Defence Minister George Fernandes (who also toured other districts). This abdication of physical responsibility by those who seek votes in the name of secularism at times of a pogrom or genocide raises a moral issue that needs to be brought centre stage in the political discourse. In the matter of the slow and brutal massacre over forty-five minutes of Ahsan Jaffri, a former Congress MP, the record is shameful. No state representative of the party even attempted to reach the besieged Gulberg Society that was under attack for over seven hours. To date the Congress president has not paid the family a condolence visit.

A similar abdication of responsibility by the political class had marked the pogrom in Mumbai a decade earlier. No sitting corporator, member of the Legislative Assembly or Council or MP, let alone minister, visited the bloody bastis, building societies and streets filled with hate. Violent marauders held absolute sway, armed with electoral rolls to identify the religion of those to be attacked.

Notable exceptions in Mumbai then were MP Sunil Dutt and film personalities Farooq Shaikh and Shabana Azmi, who broke taboos of class and profession and visited violence-torn areas at all hours. One redeeming feature was the overwhelming and spontaneous response from a variety of Mumbai's relatively privileged citizenry. They intervened repeatedly in a bid to prevent violence and exert moral pressure on the political class. They showed by their example that the underlying spirit of this vibrant metropolis was not dead, despite the reality of caste and community undertones.

Yet this cosmopolitan history was competing with another history that has been a reality of Mumbai since the mid-1960s. This is a parochial, sectarian history rooted in the regional aspirations of the Marathi working and middle classes who have been denied space and opportunities in the cosmopolitan Mumbai dream and are now crying to be heard as the 'people of the earth'. These two histories, seemingly contradictory, have enjoyed a fragile co-existence when not fractured by the threat and display of violence. But both nevertheless suggest that without efforts to link and reconcile these twin realities, conflicts are bound to be created and therefore do erupt.

Doyens of elite Mumbai stepped out into dusty Dharavi and plebeian Azad Maidan and wept for the lost soul of their city. Ratan Tata, Titoo Ahluwalia, Keshub Mahindra, Alyque Padamsee and Bakul Khote are some of them. A similar spirit led Malavika Singh, deputy editor at *Business India* at the time, to recognize our personal anguish at so many levels and arrange

for a special telephonic conversation with the then President, Shankar Dayal Sharma. During the conversation, others belonging to the liberal establishment also spoke, urging President's Rule. Jurist B.B. Lentin, retired judge of the Mumbai High Court, joined constitutional experts Nani Palkhivala and H.M. Seervai in telling India's President that 'the streets of Bombay resemble Nazi Germany'.

Previous bouts of communal violence in Meerut-Malliana, Bhagalpur, even Mumbai-Bhiwandi and Ahmedabad had revealed increasingly sharp and visible tendencies of partisan behaviour in the police force. But it was in Mumbai 1992–93 that this became a matter for national concern and debate.

Such behaviour has become more blatant as recorded in each successive bout of communal violence. The malaise has been discussed in serious establishment forums such as the National Police Academy (NPA), Hyderabad, and the National Academy of Administration, Mussourie.

It was my own experience in contacting the police for help and listening to distressing accounts from members of the minority community during the December 1992 pogrom in Mumbai that revealed the extent of alienation within the minority community due to callous and unprofessional responses from the police. Consistent provocation through December caused Mumbai's temperamentally exuberant Christmas and New Year celebrations to be subdued, only to spill over in attacks and counter-attacks in late December and January.

The call by the Shiv Sena and BJP for mahaartis—a political programme to use streets pujas to spit venom at Muslims and egg their supporters to destroy minority homes and property—on 22 December 1992 established the climate for the pogrom unleashed in January. Once the violence commenced it became possible for me, along with a network of social workers and activists from the minority community, to organize the systematic tapping of police wireless messages for over a week.

It gave us sensational proof of police bias. The text of police wireless messages and the tapes themselves were relayed on national and international television networks. The partisan behaviour of the police could no longer be denied.

This exposure led to several invitations to the National Police Academy to lecture on the subject. During one such visit, a chance encounter gifted me a lifetime friend within the police force. This led to a 5000-word interview with Vibuti Narain Rai, then of DGP rank but on deputation to the NPA to research on police behaviour and the minorities. This was in January 1995. By then, *Communalism Combat* had sprung from the embers of Mumbai when my husband-colleague, Javed Anand, and I quit our jobs in mainline media to start a journal committed to reason and dialogue. Its mission was 'to counter the riot in the mind before it spills blood on the street'.

The interview with Rai, a police officer of rare and sterling courage, titled 'No riot can continue for more than 24 hours unless the state wants it to continue', was featured as the cover story of *Communalism Combat* in February 1995. It was picked up by over twenty-one national dailies in different languages. The issue of partisan behaviour on the part of the police force had entered mainstream discourse and, though untackled as we see in the wake of the Gujarat genocide, is here to stay.

Back to my coverage of Gujarat genocide 2002. I reached Pandharvada and Eral villages in Panchmahal district and Dahod on 6, 7 and 8 March 2002 and Kheda, Ghodasar and Jinger on 9 March. It was only as we recorded testimonies of utter human desolation that these crimes were brought to light. Until then none realized the sheer scale and extent of these well-planned atrocities. Nineteen of the state's twenty-four districts had witnessed well-orchestrated carnage in which gas cylinders were employed to incinerate and destroy traces of bodies and other evidence, with sexual violence as a ready tool.

A thick smog of obfuscation, not rumour, had affected the telling of the story thus far. The extent and scale of the human,

material and psychological damage inflicted within the first seventy-two hours of Godhra had to be dug out and pieced together in minute, painstaking detail. One lesson has been learned by most reporters covering communal or ethnic violence. The repetition of lies and half-truths blurs the vision and it is therefore incumbent on the messenger to see through the fog. Yet, doing so, invites wrath and venom.

It was only after such nerve-racking visits that the scale of the violence could be weighed and communicated. One of the immediate interventions that I along with two activists, Father Cedric Prakash and Sushobha Barve, began from 5 March itself was sending copies of *Update* to the President, the NHRC, the Chief Justice, the media and other groups, containing wrap-ups of our first assessment of the genocide. One such is worth reproducing here.

> We have also pointed out in repeated media interviews and updates that a factor in Gujarat's violence is a trend recorded by Teesta Setalvad (through *Communalism Combat*) in Gujarat over the past two years. The hiring of young men, on high salaries, by the Bajrang Dal for the express purpose of wielding the talwar and the trishul. In short, the creation of a trained, private militia.
>
> Every single account that this writer received before arrival in Gujarat, and which has been corroborated by victim survivors of the brutal genocide on reaching here are strong pointers to the role played by such an outfit in the present carnage. In every incident in Gujarat over the past few days, the mobs leading the attacks were not the usual riot mobs.
>
> They were mobs of 5–15,000 that collected swiftly and with precision wrecked total destruction of life and property in brief periods and brutal ways. It is not easy to collect such large mobs even in a city like Mumbai, let alone Ahmedabad and scattered villages. Strong

indications of such a militia pose a challenge to Indian civil society and the 'secular' Indian state – how will we cope?

Can we raise a demand for a judicial inquiry into the existence of and the disbanding of such a militia? The training given to this militia is not simply for the perpetration of violence. It is also a mental training in de-humanisation of the 'enemy', through the preaching of ideological hatred that enables men (and women, in some cases) to attack, dismember, de-humanise, kill, burn and then finally enjoy the loot.

(*Update*, 7 March 2002)

The only ambulances that braved Ahmedabad's streets in the first days of the genocide and ventured to rescue maimed and brutalized humans were those escorted by Muslim personnel. Even these were stopped by prominent politicians, murderous on a saffron high, leading mobs of men intent on disrobing women and debasing an already hated, demonized victim. Civic hospitals, bound to behave in a non-partisan manner, set aside the Hippocratic oath that binds them to ethical conduct. The Sola Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad, where the corpses of the Godhra victims were brought on 28 February, was the launching pad for the genocide. Of the fifty-eight totally charred corpses, one was photographed with a trishul positioned next to it. This symbolic image of the Godhra arson was pictured in the mainstream Gujarati newspaper *Sandesh* the very next day.[2]

It was an open statement of intent regarding what was to follow. Over ensuing days and weeks, gory pictures of the Godhra carnage were used to outrage ordinary people across

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[2] Genocide Gujarat 2002, *Communalism Combat*, March–April 2002 [photograph section]

Gujarat and the country through posters, cut-outs and CDs. The loss of fifty-eight innocent lives through the burning of coach S-6 of the Sabarmati Express was pinned without proof on Godhra's Ghanchi Muslims who were portrayed as major conspirators involved in the crime. This outrage was also manipulated to insinuate that the conduct of the Ghanchi Muslims called for the post-Godhra treatment that the entire Muslim community of Gujarat got and continues to receive. A much deserved and long-overdue tit for tat.

Detailed planning explains the sustained massacre spread over many days. It paralysed normal civil and bureaucratic channels of relief and redress and clearly indicated that the writ and sanction came from the very top. A well-trained and positioned militia with poisoned minds existed in the state, having been created over time for this very purpose. The VHP officially claims a membership of 18,000 spread over 10,000 villages in Gujarat. The affiliation between it and the RSS and Bajrang Dal can be clearly gauged from their presence in a vast network of organizations that have an aggressive presence in the world of business, education and government, in short through their tentacles in society. The youth training camps in the state are another indicator. The cleverly orchestrated reach and presence of these outfits has strengthened and sustained their grip on the state and society alike, spreading terror among people, disabling them from immediate and visible resistance and action.

The 'border' location of the Vadilal Sarabhai municipal hospital (VS, as it is known) rendered it accessible to scores of hapless minority victims. However, this did not prevent sustained efforts from being made to regain this 'lost' territory. Bands of saffron-clad fanatics roamed the hospital corridors in broad daylight, brandishing swords and trishuls at terrified patients. Nor in early May 2002, did it stop violent arguments breaking out over the issue of preventing access to the minority community during a board meeting of the same hospital. The

planning of the genocide revealed a clear-cut desire to deny medical help and succour to Muslim victims.

This is a distinctly new pattern that has emerged since the 1990s when communal violence took the shape of a pogrom against a section of the people. It was visible in Mumbai in 1992–93 when senior medical practitioners of the prestigious KEM hospital told colleagues who protested against their patent intent not to treat a Muslim patient that 'this is the hatred and revenge of hundreds of years being allowed to spill. Let it come out . . . It's about time . . .'[3] It was transparently recorded during the Coimbatore violence of November 1997, three months before the serial bomb blasts that rocked that city on 14 February 1998. Bands of fanatic militants belonging to the Hindu Munani (a wing of the RSS in South India) prevented distraught rickshaw drivers from taking to hospital innocent victims of the violence unleashed on the minority community in the wake of the death of a constable, Selvaraj.[4] It was a chilling feature of the Gujarat genocide of 2002. Hospitals were turned into battlegrounds of 'us' and 'them'.

Fear was a constant companion during reporting missions over the first few days in Gujarat, reminiscent of the fear I had tangibly experienced ten years earlier. That was on 11 December 1992, the first Friday after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Believing that the *jumma ki namaaz* at Minara Masjid on Muhammad Ali Road was an occasion that a journalist ought to experience, I went alone there that day. Other colleagues from Mumbai publications had shrunk from visiting 'mini-Pakistan'. As I walked down the deserted thoroughfare, made eerie by the curfew, I was tense and afraid. It needed just one false or panicky move for injury to be inflicted. As I crossed the second junction, a man standing by a shuttered

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[3] Private conversations with the author during her coverage of the violence in Mumbai after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, for *Business India* magazine

[4] PUCL report, *Communalism Combat,* February 1998

store shouted, *'Pheko pheko, pathar pheko'* (throw stones, throw stones). I recoiled in a blind rage and shouted back, '*Aap ke paagalpan ka had hai* (there is a limit to the madness). Do you know who's on your side? The media. And what if your call had been heeded and I had been injured? Can you imagine the headlines the next day: Journalist attacked on Muhammad Ali Road.'

It is a professional hazard, of course. During the violence in Mumbai, we lost the immunity previously enjoyed by media persons when they covered communal violence of the conventional kind in which two groups attack one another. Now the character of the violence had changed from a confrontation between two groups of people to one group inflicting injury on another, often aided by the police. In such circumstances, the presence of the print or visual media (as carriers of events, visual or print) itself threatens the project. Hence attacks on journalists, including the women journalists who were witness to the calculated demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, and on press photographers in Mumbai. Gujarat also reflected this trend. The more conspicuous television crews capturing and telecasting live images every hour were the principal target.

The Gujarat genocide was the country's first televised riot, byte by byte. But even here there were measured doses of selectivity. The sensational mass arson at Godhra station was widely televised. In particular I recall repeated shots of the burnt out S-6 coach on national channels on 27 February 2002. By that evening, it was accompanied by an unsubstantiated link story that spoke of an 'ISI-conspiracy' theory. Pangs of conscience toned down subsequent coverage. The result however was that the horrific images of women and children torn asunder by frenzied mobs in the calculated post-Godhra carnage were blanked out of television coverage while S-6 coach and its victims are branded on national memory.

The mass burial of 138 persons in Ahmedabad on 6 March gave me nightmares for months. It was pieces of bone and flesh, not bodies, that were buried. Fifteen months later, I feel that some of these images too needed to be shown to shake individual and collective conscience. It was this conviction that led to the decision to publish some photographs of the Gujarat genocide in Genocide Gujarat 2002, *Communalism Combat* (March–April 2002). The Gujarat violence stands out brutally as a class apart. The levels of depravity and cruelty are sickeningly captured in these visual images.

Such selective coverage needs cool and calm assessment as the nation struggles with a warped and maimed account of the Godhra incident that has lodged itself deep in the mindset of Gujarat and the country.

The Godhra incident, for which sixty-four people have been illegally detained, tortured and even been injected with serum that numbs the senses during questioning (and which is prohibited by covenants of International Human Rights Law), is the key to understanding the psyche of medieval hatred that has gripped and dominated recent public discourse. For over sixty years, but especially in the wake of Partition, the narrative of each bout of communal violence has been laced with the myth of 'who cast the first stone?' Despite the recorded narrative and analyses of judicial findings that have exploded this myth,[5] it remains rooted in societal prejudice against the Muslim community. Unfortunately, some events of Partition tend to perpetuate the myth that it is invariably the Muslim who casts the first stone during incidents of communal violence.

Hate speech and hate writings have been held responsible by judicial commissions for fanning suspicion and anger days on end, even weeks, before the first stone was/is proverbially cast.[6] Such writings, in the case of most major incidents of

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[5] 'Punish the guilty', Teesta Setalvad, *Times of India,* 1996

[6] 'Who is to blame?', Teesta Setalvad, *Communalism Combat,* March 1998

communal violence, have emanated from fanatic right-wing Hindu groups.[7] Places like Godhra and Malegaon, where the minority–majority ratio narrows and Muslims make up 40 to 50 per cent of the population, are complex exceptions that fuel the myth of Muslim culpability and keep it alive.

For example, in post-9/11 Malegaon, when a local politician led a procession consisting mostly of Muslims to protest the United States' bombing of Afghanistan, a police constable manhandled a protestor carrying a poster of Osama bin-Laden. Sensing security in their sheer numbers, the cocksure demonstrators destroyed Hindu establishments and a temple. The inevitable reaction followed within hours as the Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal retaliated and unleashed a chain of violence against the minorities in villages around Malegaon. Similarly, prior to the torching of the Sabarmati Express, Godhra had a communal record where more often than not the aggressors were the city's Ghanchi Muslims. To a Gujarati mind tainted by venomous propaganda, the burning of the train could not have been an accident. The RSS–VHP combine has circulated four-colour pamphlets, CDs and even video recordings made into films on the Godhra episode. Each one of these contain fabrications: that Muslim children did not attend school that day, that Muslim government servants did not report for duty, that Muslim patients got themselves discharged from hospital, that Muslims did not condemn Godhra. These have since been officially denied by the then Collector of Godhra, Jayanthi Ravi, case by case. Yet the falsehoods have succeeded in convincing large sections of Gujaratis and others outside Gujarat too, of deliberate Muslim complicity in the fire. This conviction is reinforced by the government's reconstruction of the Godhra tragedy and its exploitation in the December 2002 Assembly elections in Gujarat.

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[7] *Ibid.*

Prejudice feeds on militancy in the border state of Jammu and Kashmir. More than that, the worldwide post-9/11 scenario and the current image and reality of political Islam fuels it further. The post-facto theory about Godhra, built by Chief Minister Modi and his colleagues after the incident, is critical for the politics of the RSS, BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal. It serves a chilling purpose in mass politics. It justifies the subsequent genocide in Gujarat.

During the Mumbai pogrom, it was the burning alive of a family of six Hindus at Radhabai Chawl in northern Mumbai that lent credence to the theory of post-facto retaliation by the 'Hindus' (read Shiv Sainiks). The first incident as recorded by the Mumbai police on 6 December 1992, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, was a victory procession by the Shiv Sena in the jurisdiction of Dharavi police station at around 2.30 p.m. On that same evening, similar ghantanaad (bell-ringing ceremonies in temples) and victory processions were recorded in three other localities in Mumbai before irate Muslims came out on the streets. Yet public memory is conveniently selective and recalls what it wants to remember. Public discourse turns on what it wants to hear, and people see what they want to see.

The brazen technique of repeating a lie so often that it begins to masquerade as the truth is common to all fanatical groups, whether Hindu or Muslim. An interesting anecdote about Mumbai that I recall relates to a press conference called by BJP leaders Dharamsingh Choradia and Gopinath Munde, on 8 December 1992, two days after the Babri demolition. The duo proclaimed that it was illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who started the violence. Since hard empirical data showed otherwise, I questioned them, demanding areawise details and evidence in support of their allegation. 'If what you say is true, it is very dangerous indeed. In which area, according to you, do such illegal migrants live; what is their number, and where did the violence start?' I was barely allowed to finish the

question before being asked, 'Who is addressing the press conference, we or you?'

It is now a full year since the Gujarat genocide. I spent 27 February 2003 at Godhra, moving around in a communally divided town tense with suspicion. I spent a large part of the next day with the families of the victims of Gulberg Society, Chamanpura, in Ahmedabad. They had just completed a small barsi, a religious ceremony to commemorate the departed, mourn their loss and begin a closure. I looked into the eyes of some of those to whom I have drawn close. Rupabehn, Fakirmohammedbhai, Tanvir and Mrs Jaffri. An obsessive need to narrate and re-narrate the gory events of this anniversary, when they each lost one to fourteen of their near and dear ones, has taken its toll.

Uninterrupted sleep is impossible at night as the horror of that day returns to mind. For seven to eight hours they witnessed an armed siege of their homes and the brutal slaughter of their loved ones. Gulberg Society is haunted by the ghosts of over seventy-four persons who were massacred, some after being raped or quartered. The anguish of the living does not allow the souls of the dead to rest in peace. Uncontrolled tears flow down our cheeks. It was to share their grief that I needed to make this pilgrimage to Gujarat a year later.

Do the souls of the manic perpetrators suffer any such torment?

Note on Contributors

SANJOY HAZARIKA, a specialist in issues relating to the North-East and its neighbourhood, is research professor at the Centre for Policy Research and managing trustee of the Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research. Hazarika was a member of the National Security Advisory Board (1999–2000) and the advisory panel of the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2001–02). He is the author of *Bhopal: The Lessons of a Tragedy; Strangers of the Mist: Tales of War and Peace from India's North East;* and *Rites of Passage: Border Crossings, Imagined Homelands, India's East and Bangladesh* (all published by Penguin India). *Brahmaputra,* a mini-series Hazarika made for Doordarshan, was acclaimed by critics as the best documentary series for 1999. He has produced and scripted *A River's Story: The Quest for the Brahmaputra,* an independent film. A former correspondent for *New York Times,* he won the New York Times Publisher's Award in 1984 for his coverage of the Bhopal tragedy, was awarded a National Award for Journalism in January 2003, was a fellow at Harvard University in 1993–94 and a Rockefeller International Humanities Fellow in 2003 at the University of Kentucky.

MUZAMIL JALEEL is the Kashmir bureau chief for *Indian Express* and has covered Kashmir for his newspaper since 1997. He got a Times fellowship from The Times of India group in 1994 to research 'Violence and its implications on Kashmiri society'. Jaleel was awarded the Tolerance Prize for South Asia by the

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RAAJKUMAR KESWANI is with *Dainik Bhaskar* as editor of its Indore edition. From 1998 to 2003 he headed the Madhya Pradesh bureau of NDTV. He has written for *New York Times, Sunday Observer, Illustrated Weekly of India, Dinman, Jansatta, Nav Bharat Times, Independent, Sunday, Tribune, Week* and *Outlook*. He received the B.D. Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism in 1984. In 1977 he launched a Hindi weekly, *Rapat,* in Bhopal, followed by an eveninger, *Shaharnama,* in 1979.

PRADEEP MAGAZINE is the sports editor at *Hindustan Times*. He was earlier with *Pioneer* and *Indian Express*. He is the author of *Not Quite Cricket* (Penguin India).

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ANITA PRATAP has worked for leading Indian and American newspapers and magazines, including *Sunday, Indian Express, India Today* and *Time*. Until 1999, she was the New Delhi bureau chief for CNN, reporting from South Asia. Pratap has

won several Indian and international awards, including the George Polk award for her coverage of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 1996 and the Chameli Devi Jain award in 1998. She is currently freelancing, making television documentary films, writing columns for magazines and working on her second book. Her first book, *Island of Blood: Frontline Reports from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Other South Asian Flashpoints*, was an instant best-seller.

CHITRA SUBRAMANIAM lives in Geneva with her husband and two children. For her work in investigative journalism, she has received several awards including the B.D. Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism (1990) and the Woman Journalist of the Year (1991). Her two book *Bofors: The Story behind the News* (Penguin India) and *India Is for Sale* (UBSPD) have been best-sellers and translated into several languages. Chitra Subramaniam now works for the World Health Organization.

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TARUN J. TEJPAL is a journalist and publisher. In a twenty-year career, he has been an editor with the *India Today* and the *Indian Express* groups, and the managing editor of *Outlook*. He has also written for several international publications, including *Paris Review, Guardian* and *Prospect*. In March 2000, he started *Tehelka.com,* a news and views magazine on the Net that has broken ground with its sting investigations. Tehelka has garnered worldwide acclaim for its journalism and is seen as one of the seminal web sites of world media. In 2001, *Asiaweek* listed Tejpal as one of Asia's fifty most popwerful communicators, and *Businessweek* declared him among fifty leaders at the forefront of change in Asia.

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problems across the waters in Sri Lanka. Chitra Subramaniam retraces the trail of kickbacks in the Bofors-India howitzer deal to high offices in the country. Tarun Tejpal goes a step further to show that corruption cuts across party hues. And Pradeep Magazine writes about his meeting with a bookie and how the subsequent exposure of cricket match-fixing did not really come as a surprise.

The nine essays in this collection, written long after the big stories were first published, evoke a range of emotions: compassion, shame, horror, outrage, disgust. They raise issues of media and governmental responsibility and document how democracy and the fourth estate have matured in India.

B.G. Verghese is a media professional having spent over thirty years in print journalism, initially with *Times of India* and then as editor of *Hindustan Times* and *Indian Express.* He was the recipient of the Magsaysay Award in 1975.

He served as information adviser to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and was briefly information consultant to the defence minister in 2001, following the Tehelka exposé, with a mandate to restructure defence information and make it more transparent. His report remains unpublished and unimplemented. Verghese headed the Committee on Autonomy for Broadcasting in India after the Emergency.

Verghese is on the board of Prasar Bharati and is a member of the Editors Guild of India. He chairs the Media Foundation, is the author of several books and is a columnist and visiting professor at the Centre for Policy Research.

...Minister ...have sudden- ...remember that he is the ...facilitated the Babri masjid demolition ...his acts of omission and commis- ...n as chief minister and happily ...nt to jets for a day for his sins. But ...wasn't ching afterwards that the ...ry pa... the BJP — that lauded ...n found him villainous enough to ...pel him. Now, reports suggest that ...e BJP wants him to return. A sum- ...ary of these topsy-turvy events is in ...elf evidence of the pathetic state of ...litics in UP.

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